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BROADWAY BILLY'S CURIOUS CASE



OR,

The Mysterious Disappearance
at Manitou Springs.

A ROMANCE OF COLORADO.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SKINNY'S TIGHT SQUEEZE.

"SWEET PERTATERS! Ha, ha, ha! A stuffed toad in tights! Skinny, you are the prize freak and that's the fact. Ha, ha, ha!"

Broadway Billy, Skinny, his partner, and their old friend, Roger the Rover.

It was on the afternoon of a perfect summer day, and the trio had halted on a plateau above

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BILLY HAD A WEAPON IN EACH HAND TO KEEP ORDER IN THE VILLAINOUS LINE—
PRETTY ORA WALKING JOYOUSLY AT HIS SIDE.

a valley. Down in the valley lay a railroad, and not far away was a village.

They had passed Pike's Peak, though as yet hardly from under its shadow, and were on the last stretch of their journey to Denver. It had been "overland" all the way from Santa Fe—"overland" as distinguished from railroad travel.

Billy and the old ranger were enjoying a hearty laugh at Skinny's expense.

Skinny, by the way, was "skinny" no longer. He had rounded out until he was now plainly heavier than Billy! And it was a remarkable change. No one would have taken him to be the same person. Skinny, as he had been, was gone—gone forever, and in his stead was this fat youth! What a transmogrification!

But, the cause of the mirth?

It will be remembered that, before setting out from the scene of their last recorded adventures, it had been necessary for Skinny to supply himself with new clothes. He had been taking on flesh so rapidly, since his sickness, that the old ones would no longer fit, and a change was imperative.

But, the supply at Wind Canyon Camp had been limited, and the only sort to be had was a suit of buckskin—so-called, and with that the fastidious Skinny was forced to be content until he could reach a larger base of supplies.

Now, however, something had happened.

A little while previous to the opening of our story there had been a shower, and the travelers all had got pretty thoroughly soaked.

They had little minded that, at the time, but in the drying that followed it was discovered that Skinny's "buckskin" suit was shrinking, and finally it was becoming far too tight for comfort!

At last Skinny had drawn rein, declaring he could go no further, and vowing that he would go no further until he found relief.

Billy had been teasing him not a little, and at this point he broke out with the words quoted.

"Oh, you can laugh," snapped Skinny, "but it is no laughing matter for me."

"I'd rather opine not, my son," remarked the old ranger. "You look to be in somethin' of a fix, an' that's the truth."

"The tightest fix he was ever in," declared Billy. "Why, that suit fits you tighter than your own skin, little one. Best fit you ever had in your life, if you did have fits when you was a goslin of three years' growth."

"It fits just so tight that something has got to be done, and no fooling," cried Skinny. "You will have to cut it off from me, if nothing else will do."

"Can't you unbutton it?" asked Billy.

"Not a button."

It was true. The material had shrunk wonderfully, and Skinny was filling it as full as a peach fills its skin.

"We'll have to cut the buttons off, I reckon," decided the ranger. "Kin ye git down off yer hoss, my son?"

"I don't believe I can," Skinny responded.

"I don't believe I can move."

"Then we'll have to help you down. Lend a hand, Billy!"

Billy dismounted, and together they lifted Skinny out of the saddle and to the ground.

And then Billy went off into another fit of laughter at sight of him. Billy had well described him in calling him a "stuffed toad."

Old Roger laughed too—could not help it; but with Skinny, as he had declared, it was no laughing matter. He could hardly draw a full breath so close was the pressure.

"Ain't you sorry you started to get fat?" asked Billy. "Now if you had remained thin, like you were, this suit might shrink all it could and yet you would have lots of room in it. I tell you, Skinny, there are advantages in being thin, after all. You never can—"

"Oh, dry up!" Skinny exclaimed impatiently. "If you are going to do anything for me, do it, for I can't stand this."

"You won't have to stand it long," Billy laughed. "And there's no use doing anything, for if you leave it alone a little while it will do itself. Something will have to bust pretty soon, Skinny."

Roger Watts had now got his knife ready, and applied its keen edge to the threads that held a button.

Instantly there was a little "pop!" as the button flew off, and Skinny's form filled out the extra room immediately. Then another and another followed, till all the connecting buttons had been removed.

This gave some relief. The suit was now wide apart in front, and could not have been brought together again by any means.

That much done, the old ranger and Billy tried to peel the close-fitting garments from Skinny's arms and legs. But it was no use; it could not be done.

Billy laughed till he was almost too weak to pull, and as Skinny could not brace himself to resist the strain anyhow, some other means had to be resorted to.

"Reckon I'll have ter cut it off," remarked the old ranger.

"I don't care if you do," declared Skinny. "Get it off somehow, that's all I ask now."

"Yes, skin him, Rover," urged Billy. "That's the only way to do it, I guess. He'll look nice going into Denver."

"But I tell you I'm not going into Denver, or anywhere else, this way," the "lean" lieutenant insisted.

"Then what will you do?" Billy demanded to know.

"I'll stay here in the hills till you go and get me a suit, that's what," was the emphatic decision.

The ranger had set at work with his knife, and Skinny was about half "skinned," when the horses neighed, and, a moment latter, hoof-strokes were heard.

"Give me a blanket!" cried Skinny. "Give me a blanket, quick! Somebody is coming!"

Billy sprung to obey, but before he could get the blanket unbuckled from behind the saddle and spread out, three horsemen were at hand.

The three friends had stopped on something of a plateau, as stated, above a railroad, and these horsemen had come from the direction of the mentioned village. At sight of the party on the plateau they drew rein sharply, and one demanded:

"Who are you, strangers?"

"Guess you have hit it right," responded Billy.

"What do you say?"

"You said—who are you, *strangers*; and I say, that's it. We are strangers, I guess."

"Oh! I know that. But where do you hail from?"

"We're latterly from down the range," spoke up the old ranger.

Skinny had made haste to get behind his horse and out of sight, but could not hide himself completely.

Of these new-comers, the spokesman was a man of good presence and quick, abrupt address. He was dark, and was clad in a business suit of dark cloth. His companions had the appearance of miners.

"And how long have you been here?"

"Not more than a quarter of an hour. We stopped to help my thin partner here let out his laces," assured the New York representative, and Billy jerked his thumb in the direction of Skinny.

The man was evidently puzzled to understand what was meant.

"We was caught in ther rain, yer see," explained the old ranger, "an' as ther youngster's wash-leather sort o' closed up on him, we had ter stop an' skin him, as it war."

At this they all laughed, but the spokesman was soon serious again.

"We are out in search of a young woman who has been missing from Manitou since last night. Haven't seen anything of her, have you?"

"Not a sign," responded Billy.

"Lost in the hills?" queried the old ranger.

"We can't tell. She went out for a ride, late in the afternoon, and hasn't been seen since."

"That's passin' strange, I allow," Roger remarked, thoughtfully.

"It is getting to be more than that," averred the stranger. "She knew all the trails around Manitou, and I don't see how she could get lost. It is highly mysterious."

"Has the horse been seen since?" asked Billy.

"No; it has not come back. If it had, we should think there had been an accident of some kind."

"But, couldn't ther track of ther critter be follererd?" questioned the old ranger. "Seems ter me it mought 'a' been, if any of ye knowed how."

"Yes, it was followed, and was plainly seen for a time, but there came a rain that washed it out before it could be taken up this morning."

"I see. Waal, it are sort o' queer, I allow. Who was the gal?"

"Her name is Ora Bridgefield, and the family are summering at Manitou. It is driving the girl's mother almost crazy."

"Should think it would," echoed Billy. "Hope you'll find her soon, *ife and sound*."

"So do I. There are a hundred out hunting for her, and something ought to be hear of her,

soon, I should think. If you see any young woman, don't fail to inquire."

"We won't," Billy promised. And then the three horsemen went on.

"Seems sort of queer, don't it?" Billy observed, when they had gone. "Some accident must have happened to the young woman. But, Skinny, that don't help *you* any, does it?"

"Not a bit," Skinny growled. "Feel the rest of this confounded skin off o' me, Roger, and then one of you will have to go and get me a new rig, down there at the camp."

"And come clear back up here with it?" questioned Billy. "Sa-ay, my gay an' festive spindleshanks—I mean mountain of flesh, that is rather rough on us, don't you think so? What's the matter with your going down with us?"

"What! the way I am?"

"Exactly."

"I wouldn't do it! I wouldn't do it, Billy, not if—"

"Oh, pshaw! You seem to grow modest as you grow bigger. You'll die of it, if you don't look out. I remember the time you walked the streets of San Francisco dressed in a crazy quilt, and now you object to entering this modest little camp in a blanket. But, then you are visible now, and of course that makes a difference."

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY.

BILLY'S remark caused the old ranger to smile, while Skinny looked at his partner with something of an injured air.

"I was in hopes," he observed, "that if I ever did get fat, Billy, you would let up on your eternal harping about my thinness, but it seems you can't. When do you think you can give me a rest?"

"Bless your honest little—I mean your honest, big fat heart, Skinny, who is saying a word about your being thin? I'm sure I didn't, and I leave it to Rover if I did. I was merely sayin' that you are visible now. Should think you would take it as a compliment."

"Compliment your grandmother!"

"As for giving you a rest—well, you came mighty close to taking a long rest, Skinny, and only for me and old Rover here I guess you would be sleeping under the sod to-day. Give you a rest, Skinny? Not while we can keep you with us we won't, so don't ask us. But, to get back to the start; you are using us rather rough, after all we have done for you."

"I know, Billy; but how would *you* like to go down there with no clothes on *you*? It isn't pleasant, I can tell you."

"No, I suppose it isn't, Skinny; but then, you can wrap yourself all up in the blanket."

"And the minute we get there you will begin to make fun of me."

"Now, Skinny, how can you think so mean of me?"

"I know you only too well."

"Well, Skinny, I'll tell you what I'll do; if you'll go down with us, in a blanket, and so save us the trouble of coming back here, I promise you that I won't say one word about your thinness."

"But, you'll switch off and pretend that I am an elephant in size, the same as you have been doing lately. That will be as bad as the other. I just don't want you to say a word about either one."

"All right, Skinny, I won't."

"Honest, now?"

"Honest Injun, every time. Selah!"

"All right, then I'll go. Roger, you heard the bargain."

"I did, my son."

"And if he breaks it I want you to help me give him a lickin', that's all."

"You ought to be pretty near big enough to do that without any help, by this time, Skinny."

"Now, there you go, a'ready!"

"It wasn't in the bargain that I was to begin to keep still till we got down to the town, Skin."

"You won't keep still then."

"Oh, yes I will. Let me have free rein all the way down, and when we enter the camp I'll close up like a clam, and you won't hear fat or lean out of me once. We must be moving."

While this was going on, Billy had been unfolding a blanket, and now handing it to Skinny, that young gentleman put it about his fat form.

"There!" cried Billy. "How much better do you want than that?"

"It sartainly covers ye, my son," assured Rover.

"I suppose it will have to do till I can get

better," Skinny unwillingly admitted. "I sha'n't freeze in it, that's sure."

"No, I opine not, sech a day as this," agreed Rover. "An' now, my sons," he added, "I have a thought which I will lay before ye fer action as it were. Are ye ready fer the question?"

"Yes, let 'er slide," cried Billy.

"It is this heur: It looks ter me ter be a shorter cut to ther town down thar through this sort o' gully heur on our right, than what it be ter foller on 'round ther trail. Thar ain't much of a path, but it looks ter be plain sailin'. I am in favor of goin' this way."

"And so am I!" Skinny affirmed. "We certainly won't meet any one this way, an' I don't want to see anybody till I get clothes on."

"I'm willin'," assented Billy. "What is good enough for the majority is generally good enough for me, and I'm not kicking. Lead the way, Rover, and we'll be right along with you."

"All right; mount your critters, my sons, and we'll amble."

Skinny was helped into the saddle, his blanket being too cumbersome for him to mount without help, and when Billy had vaulted into his saddle they set out.

Roger the Rover led the way, turning aside from the main trail and descending into the wooded gully he had mentioned, which had the appearance of leading more directly to the village.

For some distance it was quite steep and rough, but finally the slope was of a more favorable nature, and the footing better.

They were now upon a grassy terrace, so to call it, under the shadow of a gigantic wall of rock, and over them and all around was the cool, grateful wood. It was an inviting spot.

Skinny, with his bare legs gleaming as they hung from under the blanket, took off his hat and offered a remark to the effect that he would like to stay right there all day. Billy, however, suggested that he would probably get hungry, which brought Skinny to realize that he was hungry.

And forthwith, he fished up a piece of dried meat from a saddle pocket and began to munch at it as they rode on.

They were still going down, down under the shadow of the rocky wall and into the deep shades of the wood, when presently they were brought to an abrupt halt by an ejaculation of surprise from the old ranger, who was walking ahead as a sort of path-finder for the occasion.

"Smoke o' Gittysburg!" he cried out.

"What is it, Rover?" asked Billy, reining up short.

"You jest come on heur an' see," was the response, in excited tone.

Billy and Skinny thereupon rode forward to learn what discovery had been made.

Some boulders and fragments of rock had obstructed their view, but in a moment these were passed, and they saw what it was that had occasioned the old ranger the exclamation of surprise. At his feet lay a dead horse, with saddle and bridle on the carcass.

"What do you make of it?" asked Billy.

For answer, the old man pointed silently to the saddle.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy exclaimed. "It's a woman's side-saddle!"

"That's jest what it are, my son," the old ranger affirmed. "Yer is quick to see ther p'int."

"Then you think it's the horse that young woman rode—the one that's missing—the one the man told us about? Maybe you're right!"

"I believe that's jest it, my son."

"But, how came it here?" asked Skinny.

The old ranger pointed up toward the top of the sheer wall.

"Fell down there!" Skinny exclaimed.

"Ondoubtedly, my son. Thar's no tracks 'round heur, but up ther' is some broken bushes. An' ther way ther critter lays is proof enough."

"You're right," admitted Billy. "But, if this is the girl's horse, where is she? That's the question that is humming in the public think-box just now. Pards, there's a mystery here, if that gal has disappeared, as the man said."

"It puzzles me I allow," the old ranger mused. "If she fell with the critter, she'd orter be heur, fer it's a fall that would mean sartain death. I don't understand it, nohow. What is your think about it, my son?"

"I don't know what to think," answered Billy.

"Don't yer think it looks like ugly business—foul play?"

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do, fer a certainty."

"What sort of foul play do you think it has been?"

"Ha! there ye has got me, my son. I don't

p'tend ter know, nor yet even to offer a 'spectable guess; but, I don't b'lieve a fine critter like this one ever fell over thar of its own will—not a bit ov it!"

"And you don't think the rider fell with the horse, eh?"

"Can't, my son, can't think so. If she had, she'd been killed; that's all there is of it, an' as she ain't here that settles that."

"Here's another p'izen diffiklity that wants to be straightened out, Skinny, sure's you're born," cried Billy. "Here's a chance for us to get in our fine work once more as the matchless detectives from the Orient."

"Right, my son, I believe you are!" the old ranger excitedly urged. "I'd like ter know the truth of this business; my heart is right in it an' bekaise a young girl is the sufferer."

"But, we've got no time to stop and monkey with it, that's sure," put in Skinny. "We want to move on toward Denver."

"I don't know how it is going to be, Skinny," added Billy, thoughtfully. "I feel the fever coming on, and if it gets to raging you know what the result will be. There will be no holding me."

"Maybe some of Roger's weed will be good for that kind of fever as well as for the kind I had. You had better let him mix you up a gallon or two, and take it without delay. You don't want to go poking your nose into this matter, and you may regret it if you do, as that's a hundred people already on it and you havn't been asked for your invaluable services."

"Wet blanket again, eh, Skinny? But it won't do any good. I feel that fever creeping through my veins more and more every second, and I'm afraid it will have to run its course. Skinny, I don't see how I can go on, and not know the secret of this dead horse and lost gal mystery. It would be a blank page in my history, and one that would worry me into an early grave."

"And I'd sartainly like to know more about it myself," supported the Rover.

"Yes; and maybe poke your nose into a nest of vipers and get stung to death for your pains. We'd better go right on to Denver, and attend to our own business and not monkey with what don't concern us."

"And leave the fair heroine to the tender mercy of her foes?" cried Billy, in a dramatic way. "Never! Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, give me liberty or give me death, and more of it;—I'm going to try to get at the facts in this case, my gay an' festive little—big, I mean—pard!"

"Then you'll have to go it alone."

"Not so. You and Roger are going to help me. We're going to take hold of this case and jerk the fuzz right off the tail of the beast, you bet. If this is the horse of that missing girl, don't ye see we are the finders of the first clew to the mystery, and we're going to work it for all it's worth. What do you say to that lay-out, Rover, my venerable Ajax?"

"I'm with ye, my son, with my gun loaded fer b'ar. If this heur is ther critter of the missing young woman, we are on ther trail, that's sartain. Let's take a closter look around, an' see what's ter be seen."

CHAPTER III.

ROUGH ON SKINNY.

SKINNY was thus made the *cif* horse in the team of three. He had either to cast his vote with the majority, or be counted out.

But we know Skinny pretty well by this time. While he was ever ready to dissuade Billy from meddling with cases of this sort, he was generally as ready to lend aid when he found it useless to oppose.

"Well, if both of you are against me," he remarked, "I suppose it won't look polite for me to stay out, so I'm with you. You have done the fair thing by me, lately, and I can't hold back when there's danger to be faced. I'm with you, and we will see what is to be found out."

"Nobly spoken!" exclaimed Billy, clapping his hands in applause. "You are a brave and noble youth, Skinny, pard, and I'm proud of you! Your personal danger will be greater than ever before, yet you do not hold back on that account. You are a partner to be proud of, Skinny."

"You say my danger will be greater?" repeated the "lean" lieutenant, wonderingly.

"Yes; greater than ever before," Billy insisted.

"I don't see how that can be."

"It is plain enough. You weigh as much again as you used to, and of course there is more of you. When you were thin the per-

centage of chances of your being hit by a stray bullet was small indeed, but now that you are so muck bigger—"

"Oh, you shut up, and let's see what Rover is finding."

Billy laughed, and they turned their attention to the horse, which the old ranger was examining.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Billy asked.

"Some things is plain enough," was the response.

"Dead hoss, frinstance," suggested Skinny.

Billy looked at him reprovingly.

"Skinny, you should take care," he cautioned. "There is danger of a relapse, if you are too careless. Your brain won't stand such severe drains as that. You must not do it again. This ain't Wall street, ye know, fer puts an' calls."

"Yes; that's one of ther plainest facts," the Rover assumed. "Ther critter is dead enough beyond all question. But heur's ther rest of ther items that I sift out at first scoutin' around. Ther critter was rode by a woman."

"The saddle proves that."

"Sartainly. No man in his right mind would git up onto one of them things ter ride a hoss. Then, ther next item, ther hoss hasn't been dead more'n twenty-four hours at ther most. That is a straw in ther direction of ther 'clusion that it maybe was the critter rode by ther missin' gal."

"Struck oil again, Rover!" exclaimed Billy. "You are a detective, sure. I guess I'll take off my hat to you and let you take command of our company."

"Don't be too fast about doin' that," the old man made response. "I am about at ther eend of my string now, an' I'll turn ther hull business over ter you. I merely want ter mention jest one more item that these heur old eyes of mine lights upon as I gaze around, an' that are this: Ther critter was pushed over from ther ledge up thar, an' that by main force, too."

"How do you know that?" demanded Billy, wonderingly.

"Plain enough, my son. Jest step this side an' cast your optic heur."

Billy and Skinny both stepped around to that side of the dead animal, and looked where the old man was pointing.

There, on the side of the dead horse, was the bloody imprint of a man's hand, where it had evidently been placed with force, the fingers being imprinted wide apart and distinct.

"Sweet pertaters!" ejaculated Billy, at the sight, "there's a mystery here as big as a house and barn together, and I know it. My fever is away up now, Skinny, and there's no stopping it. We have got to know more about this curious case."

"I agree with you, my son," rejoined the old ranger, eagerly. "I am like you to a sartain extent in that respeck. When I strike a curious trail I allus want ter know what manner o' critter has been along that way, an' I most gen'lly find out, too, afore I drop it."

"It's just that way, here," returned Billy. "Here is blood, and we want to know all about that blood. We must know where it came from, that's all. Was the girl murdered, think you, Roger? Give us your prognostic."

"Hard ter tell. Somebody was hurt, that's sartain. Blood don't flow onless there's a bleed-hole made first."

"I guess you're right," Billy coincided.

"But, we won't find out anything by standing here," remarked Skinny. "Let's be on our way to the town. I want some clothes, whether the mystery is ever solved or not. I'm no Indian, to go about togged out in a blanket."

"Skinny, I doff my hat to you," cried Billy, taking off his head covering and putting it under his arm, at the same time making a bow. "Jewels of wisdom are continually dropping from your lips. If we don't go on we won't get there, that's certain. Let's go on, Roger, by all means."

"Yes, my son, sartainly; but what about these trappin's?"

"Better leave them right here, hadn't we?" suggested Skinny.

"I thought mebby you'd want to take the saddle an' bridle along with ye to ther camp, as proof of our story."

"I looked at it in just the other light," Billy argued. "I thought we'd better keep still until we had had time to look around a little on the quiet. If we carry the saddle to town we will have to tell our story at sight, and that may be the very means that will knock us out of learning the truth."

"You are right, my son, you are right. I never thought of it in that light. We will leave it right heur."

"But, we must take note of everything about

it, so's we can describe it to a dot," assumed Skinny.

"More words of wisdom," assented Billy. "Skinny, your brain keeps pace with your body. We'll take a careful inventory of everything. Roger, you just see how many ears the beast has, will you?"

"Say, do you want me to kick a hole in you?" cried Skinny, in evident anger.

"Sweet pertaters! No!" Billy hastily demurred.

"Well, then, don't be so funny over what I say."

But, it was all in fun, of course, and the trio fell to making mental memoranda of the dead horse and its trappings.

It was soon done, and as they turned away, Billy said:

"I guess we can give a pretty straight description of that animal, if it is necessary or convenient to do so. And now, Rover, my veteran, it will fall to you to remember the place, so that you can lead us back to it again if necessary."

"And I can do that with ease," the old ranger assured. "I haven't tramped all these years for nothing. I'll remember the spot all right, never fear."

"Then, Skinny, we'll boost you into the saddle and be on our way. We have business on hand now."

They resumed their way, the ranger leading as before, on foot.

Following the dry bed of what had once perhaps been a stream, a walk of some forty minutes brought them out into the valley, and the village was before them not a great distance away.

It had been down hill all the way from the point where they had left the plateau, and now looking back they could see the plateau, and also that the main trail was considerably longer than the way by which they had come.

They rode forward across the grassy flat, crossed the railroad, and pretty soon struck into a road on the other side leading into the settlement.

Skinny now drew his bare legs up under the blanket as far as he could, and drew it tighter about him.

"It's rather rough on you, to have to go into town in this style, Skinny," Billy remarked.

He could not help smiling, for Skinny did present a ridiculous appearance.

"I wish it was you," was Skinny's response, "maybe then you would know how nice it is. I don't want any of your fooling now, Billy, about my being lean or fat, and I want clothes just as soon as we can get them."

"You have my word for it," Billy reminded. "You will not hear lean or fat from my lips, and we'll fix you out as soon as we can. Brace up, now, my plethoric pard, and ride into town with dignity becoming your station in life. You must bear in mind that folks can see you now."

They rode on, with Roger walking beside Billy, and ere long entered the village.

It was a small place, of modern fashion, and not unlike any eastern town so far as immediate appearances were concerned.

There was the railroad station, a number of houses, a store, a small church and other buildings. It might have been a model village transplanted from anywhere in New England.

To the store the trio directed their steps, and Billy there dismounted and entered.

In a moment he came out, and smilingly announced:

"It's all right, Skinny; they can fit you out here. Mind, now, and don't let the boys see your stockings when we lift you down."

"Don't have so much to say with your tongue," Skinny snapped, as he prepared to dismount. "Help me down and let me get out of sight as soon as I can. I don't want to be made a show of."

Billy and the old ranger laughed, while they helped him down, and as soon as his feet touched the ground Skinny ran for the store.

Billy was grinning from ear to ear, as though something tickled him wonderfully, and he nudged the ranger.

The reins had been thrown over convenient posts, and they now followed Skinny into the store.

Across the street was the hotel, with a number of loungers in front, and only a short distance away the railroad station, and Skinny was eager to get out of sight as speedily as possible.

Up the two steps he leaped, his bare legs flashing at every stride, and as he reached the door he threw aside all restraint and plunged into the

welcome hiding-place, his blanket flowing with innocent and charming negligee.

But he was no sooner in than a series of screams greeted his ears, and he found that he had run almost into the midst of a bevy of young ladies who were standing at a counter, and with a startled groan he clutched his blanket and drew it about him.

Billy and the old ranger, just at the door, could not repress their laughter, while the proprietor of the store looked on amazed.

Billy had played Skinny rather a rough joke, and Skinny, looking daggers at his impulsive pard, dodged out of sight, while the young ladies, over their first shock, were giggling, over the comical occurrence.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW ACTOR APPEARS.

THE proprietor of the store was a Dutchman. He stood with hands uplifted, at loss at first to know what to say or do.

Dignity would not allow him to laugh, as he wanted to do, so with an effort he put on the most horrible expression he could summon.

"V'at you means by coming into mine store in sooch disgraceful style as dot?" he demanded, severely. "Dot vas von nice fashion to come into the bresence of ladies mit, now wasn't id?"

"Keep cool, Dutchy!" interposed Billy, "and don't get excited about it. You know I asked you if you had any men's clothing for sale, and when you said you had, I told you I had a pard who was badly in need of some; and then you told me to bring him right in. Isn't that correct?"

"Yaw, dot vas so; but—"

"There isn't room for any but in the matter," Billy persisted. "You told me to bring him right in, and I did so, and you can't blame anybody but yourself. But, bless you, isn't he rigged out in a blanket so that you can't see much of him but his ears? What are you kicking about? I guess the ladies have got over their scare: eh, girls?"

"We'll get over the shock, I guess," one of the girls made bold to respond.

"fO course you will!" declared Billy, with all confidence. "I remember the first time I kissed my sweetheart—I haven't got any now, you understand; she went off and married another fellow after I had fattened her on ice cream for a whole season. I remember the first time I kissed her. She made a terrible fuss about it, got right up on her dignity and dared me to do it again. I did it again, promptly. I wouldn't be bantered, you see. Then she got real mad, and dared me to do it only just once more and she'd tell her pa. I did it again; and by that time she was beginning to see how nice it was, and she didn't make any more fuss."

The storekeeper grinned from ear to ear, and the girls snickered and giggled among themselves, while from behind some boxes and barrels Skinny was glaring at Billy with fire in his eye.

"Why didn't you tell me there was ladies here?" he demanded. "I wouldn't 'a' come in here this way for anything."

"But, here you are," laughed Billy, "and the agony is over and no harm done. Go on and wait on the ladies, Dutchy, and when you get done with them you can see what you can do for my partner. Don't hurry yourselves on our account, girls, but go right on and buy your ribbons and things. You mustn't mind Skinny, and don't cast your eyes his way too often, for he is as bashful as can be. You can see that he is blushing like a red pepper. Take your time—Hello! what have we here?"

There was a post-office in the store, and while speaking, Billy had been looking around sharply.

His eye had fallen upon something that demanded further investigation, and it was that which caused him to exclaim.

On one end of the store-counter was the cabinet of post-boxes, and upon that was hung a printed notice of reward.

Billy advanced to it quickly and read it aloud. It was worded as follows:

RWARD!

"A reward of two hundred dollars will be paid to any person who will furnish information that will lead to the discovery of the whereabouts of Miss Ora Bridgefield, who has been missing from Manitou Springs since late on the afternoon of the 20th instant. Any information, no matter how trifling, will be thankfully received and liberally paid for. Call on or address,

"PHARAOH BRIDGEFIELD,
Manitou Springs, Col."

Under this was a description of the young woman, as well as of the horse she had ridden. The description of the horse tallied exactly with the dead one they had found.

Beyond doubt they had stumbled upon a clew to the mystery!

As Billy finished reading this poster, the young women left the store, whereat the young peripatetic detective turned his attention to the wants of his partner.

"Now, Dutchy," he said, "let's see what sort of rig you can fit this young gentleman out with. Trot out the very best you have got, and gladden his eyes for once. He is tired of the style he is now wearing. It is too primitive to suit his taste. Come along, Skinny."

The proprietor led the way to the rear of the store, where the clothing was in stock.

"Now, led me see," meditated the Dutchman, rubbing his fat chin. "Maype I have von suit v'at will yust suit you, young mans. Id vas a regular wild West style. Id vas a chenuine buckskin suit, mit—"

"No, you don't!" protested Skinny.

"V'at vas dot you say?" asked the Dutchman.

"I say I don't want any more buckskin suits," Skinny declared. "I had one, and that's what's the matter with me now."

Billy explained, and the Dutchman laughed. He insisted that his was the real thing and would not shrink, but Skinny would have nothing more to do with buckskin.

Finally the "lean" lieutenant was fitted out in a respectable manner, though not exactly to his liking, and the trio left the store.

"Wal, my son, whar to now?" inquired the old ranger.

"I think we'll cast anchor right here," answered Billy. "Let's go over and see what sort of a hotel this is."

"Do you mean to stay here to-night?" asked Skinny.

"I think so, Alderman Skinny, but can't say yet. We are going into this mysterious Manitou case, you know."

Taking the bridles from over the post, the lads led their horses across to the hotel, where they secured them again in like manner and entered the establishment.

It was a hotel of the usual type, although an improvement, of course, upon the usual hostelry of the mining-camps.

Billy took it upon himself to attend to the business, and in a few moments they were booked and their horses were taken away to be cared for.

That having been gotten through with, the trio took seats on the piazza to discuss the situation, with a view to determining what should be done concerning their discovery.

Before they had time for that, however, a rough-looking fellow came along and accosted them.

He had come from the direction of the railroad station near at hand, and it was plain that he had come with a purpose.

"Sa-ay!" he saluted, as he stopped in front of the piazza and braced himself in a straddling fashion.

He was not by any means an inviting specimen. He looked like a played-out gambler. He had a long, drooping mustache, wore a broad hat, and his suit of black was gray and seedy with long wear.

"Well, say it," Billy promptly invited.

"Are you ther fellers what came up the road thar, a spell ago?" the man asked.

"We came that way," Billy assured, "and I guess it was about a spell or a spell and a half ago."

"Don't you try to be funny with me, sonny," the fellow warned, showing his teeth. "I am Pinon Pete, and them what knows me best is the most civil."

"Well, what is it you want to know? Anything we can do for you? Shall be happy to serve you, if it is anything in the way of honest doings."

Billy noticed that the man looked at him sharply at that.

"What do you mean now?" the man demanded.

"Just what I said," Billy answered. "I couldn't make it plainer if I tried a week."

"Then you mean to throw out ther hint that Pinon Pete does have doings that are not exactly honest. Is that it?"

"I haven't said anything of the kind."

"But you might as well have said it, all the same."

"And maybe I would have come close to the dot if I had. But, we are wasting our wind. What do you want with us?"

"I've a notion to show you what I want with you," was the angry snarl. "You are too fresh with that tongue of yours. For a cent I'd step up there and pull your ear for you."

"I wouldn't want you to try it on, for

your own sake," retorted Billy, smiling as he spoke.

"Why, confound your impudence! Do you mean to insult me, and then defy me in the bargain? Young feller, you don't know me."

"No; and, what's more, I don't want to," Billy retorted, now with something of earnestness in his tone. "If you don't want anything, go on about your business."

The man looked at Billy in a puzzled way. Evidently the New York delegate was something new in his experience.

"If it wasn't for making myself tired," he drawled, "I would step up there and teach you manners just for once in your life, anyhow."

"You bet it will make you tired, if you try it on," Billy returned, fearlessly. "Now if you want anything, say so; if you don't, then amble on. You are making us weary."

"Pshaw! what am I thinking about? You are only a kid, and Pinon Pete can have no words with a kid. I should be laughed at if I did. I was going to ask you what way you came when you came here. Did you come up the trail?"

"You would have saved lots of breath, if you had come right out with that in the first place," returned Billy. "No, we didn't come up the trail very far, as we only struck into it a little distance down. We came from across the other side of the flats there. Why, what do you want to know for?"

Billy had noted that the fellow seemed to have to keen interest in the matter.

CHAPTER V.

BILLY'S MUSCLE TESTED.

THE fellow took a good survey of the trio before replying.

"You might have found that out long ago, if you had had less tongue," he soon rejoined.

"Seeing that I am only a kid, you must allow for that," said Billy. "But, I have answered your question, and if you don't want to answer mine, amble along."

"Blazes, boy, you tempt me to give your nose a twist! But, I mustn't forget myself."

"No, don't. You won't forget it, if you try that on, you bet."

The fellow gave a sniff of disgust, and dismissed the point with a wave of the hand.

"What I was coming at," he said, "was this: I am expecting a pard to meet me here, and he ought to have been here yesterday. You didn't see anything of him, did you?"

"That's hard to tell, responded Billy.

"Of course, unless I describe him. He looks something like me. You can tell by that whether you have met him or not."

Mr. Pinon Pete, it seemed, could drop his broad Western vernacular at will.

"We haven't seen him," declared Billy, promptly.

"He was comin' from that way, and I thought maybe you had. You didn't come down through ther gully, did you?"

"Where's the gully?" asked Billy.

"Over there where you see that dark line of woods," pointing.

"Why, there isn't any trail through there, is there?" Billy still questioned.

"No; but I thought I saw you heading from that way."

"We did come across from about that direction, I guess. But, don't let us detain you, Mr. Pete."

"Dast you, young feller, but you will keep on till you tempt me too far! That's as good as savin' I'm to go on about my business."

"An'take keer that he don't tempt ye too fur, stranger," here put in the old guide. "It might be a surprise fur ye if ye was to undertake ter tone him down. Yer don't know him."

With another snif, Mr. Pinon Pete went on his way, evidently in earnest in thinking it beneath his dignity to get up a qaarrel with a beardless youth.

Billy looked after him keenly, and shook his head as he turned something over in mind.

"There's something back of this," he muttered.

"Yer think so?" queried the old guide.

"I do, and that's the fact. He don't ask us questions for nothing."

"What do you suspect?" asked Skinny.

"I don't know. A thought has hit me hard in the place where I live, though."

"And what is it?"

"I believe that fellow wanted to know whether we came down through that gully or not. What was his reason for it? Has he got some secret in there that he don't want discovered?"

"Great ginger! You don't think he had a hand in pushing that horse over in the hole, do you?" demanded Skinny, "or that, maybe, he is the one who has made away with the young woman?"

"But," struck in the old ranger, "I can't agree with ye on that ground, my sons. If he was guilty of havin' a hand in it, wouldn't he be likely to keep very still about it and say nothin'? It pears to me so, anyhow. But, it does look queer."

"That is a failin' that all rascals have," averred Billy. "The man who has done a crime is his own detective, in seven cases out of ten. Give him lots of rope, and he'll be bound ter hang himself. Now, there may be nothin' in this, and there may be a good deal in it. It is our business to keep an eye on Mr. Pinon Pete."

"And that's what we'll do," concluded Skinny, with an awakening interest. "There is every chance in the world that this ugly-looking customer is the very one who knows all about the case. He would never suspect us of being detectives, you know, and couldn't see the harm in asking a simple question or two, to find out whether we had discovered the carcass of the horse."

"Bully for you!" exclaimed Billy, clapping his hand upon Skinny's plump leg. "Your brain is expanding as your body swells. There is nothing plainer than that Mr. Pinon Peter has been a sharper in his best days, and he didn't come here with that question without some object in view. And even if it isn't as we suspect, it will do no harm to watch him a little."

"I agree with ye, my son," acquiesced the veteran.

"Well, let us drop this and turn back to the first chapter, as it were," proposed Billy. "Let us look at the case just as we were going to do before Mr. Peter put in his piper."

"Lead off, then," said Skinny.

"Well, I'll do it, my gay and festive roly-poly. To begin with, there is a missing young lady who is conspicuous for her goneness at Manitou Springs. Her dad, as I take the honorable Pharaoh to be, offers a reward for information concerning her. We happen to have a clew, in the shape of a dead horse, and it hits me that it is our duty to go down into Egypt—I mean Manitou—and see old Pharaoh."

"That's about the proper thing to do, I should say," admitted the lieutenant.

"Don't see any question of doubt about it, Skin. We have stumbled upon the find, and it is ours to sell. We may as well scoop in that little two hundred by the way as not. And, maybe, we will get into the thing and work up the case in fine style. Anyhow, it is worth the trying."

"And when will we set out for Manitou? How far is it over there?"

"It ain't more'n twenty or twenty-five miles," spoke up the ranger.

"And I think we'll go there to-night, Skinny, you and me," "I have been running this matter through my think-box, and I've about figured out a plan."

"Well, what is it?"

"We'll go down to Manitou by train. We'll leave our horses here, in the care of Roger, if he will stay—"

"Jest as you say, my son," the old man agreed.

"Well, then, you can stay here nominally to look out for the horses, but more particularly to look after Pinon Pete. I guess you understand Rover."

"I opine I do, my son. You want me to keep half an eye on the animiles, and about an eye and half on that pizen critter. I can do that, you bet! And if that's ary a tooth out of his main cog, I'll find whar it's missin'."

"Bully for you! I guess you'll do. That is settled, then. You and I are to go to Manitou, Skinny, leaving the Rover here. We will attend to that end of the combination while he looks after this end. And after we have seen old Pharaoh, Roger, we will send him to you if he wants to go where the horse is."

"I'll be on hand, 'round the hotel heur."

"Settled then. Come on, and we'll go over to the station and ask about the trains."

"Yes; but you don't get me away from here till I have had my supper," Skinny gave notice. "I am as hungry as though I hadn't had a meal in a week."

"All right, hungry one, we'll have supper before we go, if it can be done in time to catch the train. If it can't, you'll have to fast till we get there, for we must hustle."

"Well, come on, then, and we'll see how much time we have got."

They rose and were about to descend the front

steps, when they were suddenly confronted by about the worst-looking specimen of humanity they had seen since their arrival.

He was a fellow of homely visage, ragged, dirty-looking generally. He appeared to be about half-drunk, his watery eyes were pale with alcohol, and his tangle of hair and beard was seemingly saturated with it. But he was a powerful man, or ought to have been, judging by his size.

"Hello!" he hiccupped, "what has we hear?"

"Only a couple of innocent tenderfooters," explained Billy.

"Tenderfeet, hey? Waal, now, it does me eyes good ter look on sech. Saay, I wants yer ter come and treat me. What do yer say ter that?"

"Can't do it," answered Billy. "We are in a hurry."

"But, it won't take ye long to stop half an hour, sonny, an' you don't know how r'ale dry I be."

"Can't help it if you are as dry as a hot air pump, we can't stop to treat you now, and I don't know that we would do it if we had all day."

"Yer don't, hey?"

"That's it, precisely, hey!"

"We'll have ter see about that. When El Paso Mike asks a feller ter go up and ante, said feller 'most allus goes right up an' does it."

"But he won't do it this time," assured Billy. "We have something else on hand besides treating bummers like you to coffin nails. Get out of the way, now, or you'll get upset."

"Upset! Me? Haw, haw, haw! Why, sonny, yer can't never 'a' heerd tell of El Paso Mike. I'm ther wu'st pea in ther pod, by long odds. I'm a bad man from over yan, and don't ye forget it. D'y'e see that 'ar saloon down thar?"

"Yes, I see it."

"Waal, yer has got ter go right down thar an' fill me up wi' benzine. If yer don't, thar is likely ter be a rumpus right heur an' now. What do ye say to that? Now be keerful how ye say yer say, fer I'm a rousin' terror, I tell ye. I'm sich a snorter that they couldn't find a place big enough ter name me after, so I jest took on ther name of ther county."

"Have you had your say?" and the New York representative looked the disgust he felt.

"Yas, that's my say," was the retort. "Now you had better be keerful, sonny, better be keerful."

"And if you knows when you are well off," supplemented the old ranger, "you had better be keerful yerself. You'll swear you've been hit wi' dynamite if ther lad goes off."

The bum gave a snort of disdain.

"Well, as you have had your say," rejoined Billy, "jest lend ear to my chirp, if you please. I'm not going to any saloon with you, and I'm not going to treat you. And now, if you are not out of the way in about ten seconds, I will turn you up and put your nose in the sand."

"Haw, haw, haw! Why, you ding-dasted young rattletrap, I'll take you up in one hand an'—"

But, he didn't have opportunity for carrying out the threat he was going to make. Billy "went for" him, caught hold, doubled him over and had him standing on his head before he knew it. And, not only that, but he rubbed him around, mussed him up, wiped the road with him—to the amusement of all observers, and then with a parting kick allowed him to go.

CHAPTER VI.

PINON PETE'S PIPING.

"THAT'S the kind of a young rattletrap I am!" Broadway Billy exclaimed at the finish.

A roar of laughter went up from the group of observers, and Mr. El Paso Mike floundered around in the dust like a chicken with its head off.

If so big, great and important that nothing short of the whole county had been able to provide him with a name, he now had one—and that was "Mud."

"If you want any more, come right up and take it," Billy invited. "If you want to take me up, catch right on and begin. This may be your last chance, so don't fail to improve the opportunity."

By this time the fellow was getting upon his feet again.

With a wild snarl he reached for a weapon, but before he could draw, Billy had the "drop" on him.

"I am with you there, too," Billy cried. "If you want any of that, I am in. And I am as handy on the shoot as I am with my muscles, too."

The fellow let go of his weapon, and turned away with a growl.

"You have picked up a young tarrantler this time, El Paso, fer sure," some one sung out.

"Jest as I told him he would," averred the old ranger. "That 'ar lad are a snortin' terror when ye wake him up to it. He's a bad piece o' stuff ter monkey with, an' I'm tellin' ye."

"Maybe he won't be so fresh another time," muttered Billy, putting away his revolver. "I ought to have served him a good deal worse."

He went on his way toward the station then, Skinny and the old ranger following—the bummer at the same time, and not so drunk as he had at first pretended, making his way in the direction of the saloon.

When he entered the place, he advanced straight to a table where Pinon Pete was seated, and in a tone of commingled anger and disgust, exclaimed:

"Jest look at me, will yer!"

Pinon Pete glanced up quickly.

"What the dickens has happened ye?" he demanded, in astonishment.

"What has happened me? I've been mauled around by a cantankerous spiral spring o' chain lightnin', that's what!"

"I should say ye had, by the looks of ye. Did the whole three of 'em pitch onto you and do you up like that? It was mighty rough on you, and I guess you have earned your five."

"Earned my five? I've earned a tanner if I've earned a cent."

"Then you polished the kid off in good shape, did you? That was right, and here's your five—that's what I agreed to pay you."

Mr. El Paso took the bill.

"I don't know as I done much polishin'," he remarked, "but I carried out my part of ther 'greement, so this hyar money is mine by right. I done most of my polishin' in ther road on my back."

"What do you mean? What are you gittin' at? Did they all jump onto you before you had time to punch the young rooster?"

"Waal, hardly. Fact is, that same young rooster done it all hisself."

"What?"

"It are a fact."

"You don't mean to say that that boy whipped you!"

"Mebby not jest that, but he was ther cause of my bein' in ther state ye see. I don't want no more medicine of that sort."

"See here, Paso, tell me just what happened, without any more fooling around. Did that boy really do you up in this way, and all alone at that? I can't believe it, I swear I can't."

"Can't hardly believe it myself, Pete, but it's ther fact jest ther same. I 'greed ter go and lick him fer five dollars. I went, and I opened on him in a way ter lead him inter a muss. I led him. But ther fu'st I knewed I was all mussed up myself."

"And the others didn't help him?"

"Not a bit. He done it all hisself. He nipped on like a flash, and ther next thing I knewed I was standin' on my left ear. Then things went swimmin' around fer a space o' half a minnit or so, till finally I got a lifter behind that sent me skatin' off on ther bridge of me nose, plowin' up ther road as I went. I tell ye that rooster is a terror."

Some fellows had followed the bummer into the room, and they were laughing at him as he made his humble confession.

"But why didn't you shoot him?" demanded Pete.

At that the new-comers laughed more heartily than ever.

"Why didn't I shoot him? Bless ye, I did try ter draw a popper ter give him a scare, but he had me covered afore I could get half-way thar. If you don't think he is a snorter, go an' try him yerself, that's all."

"But, you haven't earned that five," Pinon Pete complained.

He spoke in low tones so that others might not hear. Perhaps he did not want it known that he had had anything to do with the fracas."

"I'd like ter know what's ther reason If I didn't," retorted the used-up Mr. El Paso Mike. "I done what I 'greed ter do, an' that was ter tackle him. I wouldn't do it ergain fer a twenty, an' that is gospel truth, every time."

"Well, keep it, but keep still about my giving it to you. Where is the young Sullivan now?"

"He loped off in the direction of the station, him an' his pards. Don't know whether they is goin' off by train or not."

"And you don't care, either, eh?"

"That's about it. I have had all I want out

of him. His caliber is too big fer my ammerition, yer see."

"The old one said he was something on his muscle, but I didn't take much stock in it. I'll walk over that way and find out about 'em. See that you say nothing."

These last remarks had been exchanged in low tones.

Pinon Pete got up and passed out of the saloon while the crowd gave its attention to teasing El Paso.

In the mean time Billy and his "pards" had entered the station and had gained the information they desired concerning the trains.

There was a train leaving about five o'clock that made connection at Colorado Springs for Manitou, and it was the last train of the day.

"And that's the one we'll take, Skinny," Billy decided, when they turned away with their information. "And there is just about time enough for you to feed up, if you can find anything to eat."

"I'll find it, unless there is a famine in the place," Skinny declared.

"There may be one, after you have filled up," Billy jokingly retorted. "You are the greatest eater I ever saw. If you don't choke off you are going to be as big as the Bowery Fat Woman before you know it."

"Can't help it, Billy, I am hungry, and have got to eat."

"Sweet pertaters! Skinny, it can't be you, can it? To look at you now, and to think what you have been, almost makes me believe there must be a mistake somewhere. Ha, ha, ha! What a time there will be when we get home, if you continue to hold your own. You'll be a different looking chicken from what you were in the picture you sent home from Santa Fe."

Talking along that line, they made their way back to the hotel.

As they came there they met Pinon Pete, on his way to the station, and he eyed Billy narrowly. The young wayfarer from Gotham met his gaze fearlessly, and the man evidently saw that he was not so boyish as he had at first taken him to be.

"But then, El Paso has soaked in rum so long that there is no strength left in him," the fellow mused, when they had passed. "It wouldn't do for the lad to tackle a man like me."

When he reached the station he went into the office and saluted the agent in a familiar way.

"Hello, Jimmie," he cried.

"Same to you, Pinon," was the agreeable response.

"You seem to be taking life easy."

"Same as yourself. Drop onto a chair and hold it down."

The rusty-looking sharp did so, and elevated his feet to a corner of the desk in front of him.

"Might as well take it easy as any other how, in a place like this. By the way, Jimmie, did you have two boys and a man in here a few minutes ago?"

"There were two young fellows, not exactly boys, and an old man in here only a little while ago, if you mean them."

"They're the ones, no doubt. Any objection to tellin' me what they wanted?"

"Why, no; they asked about trains to Manitou."

Pinon Pete looked concerned.

"To Manitou, eh?"

"Yes. Have you got your eye on them?"

"That's what I have. It strikes me that they are not as straight as they might be, and I'm going to look and see what they're up to."

"I thought they looked like pretty decent sort of fellows, that keen-eyed one especially. By the way, I just heard he upset El Paso only a little while ago. Any truth in it?"

"Lots of it, or seems to be, for I didn't witness it. Paso thought he could work him for a drink, I believe, but the lad pitched in and stood him on his head. Paso looked as though he had been wrestling with a cyclone."

"Ha, ha, ha! He must be on his muscle. But, what do you think is crooked about the party?"

"They ride mighty good horses, the lads, I mean."

"Don't think they stole 'em?"

"Like as not."

"Might be hard to prove."

"Maybe it would. Did they say whether they was going to Manitou or not?"

"Yes; they are going to take the next train down."

"Good enough. I'll hang around here and see them off, I guess. I feel sure they are working a game of some sort."

"And if they are, you want to be in it, eh? Ha, ha! Well, you know what you are doing,

I guess, and I know you have cut your own teeth."

In like strain they chatted on, till it was nearing train-time, when Pinon went out to the platform to watch for his suspects. What interest had he in them? Was it as Billy had surmised? Or was it as the fellow himself had told the agent?

CHAPTER VII.

SOME INTERESTING MOVES.

In the mean time Broadway Billy had assisted Skinny to find something to eat, and the ex-thin partner had filled up.

He was a good while doing it, and in fact was not quite done when Billy cut him off with the assertion that they had not a moment to spare if they wanted to catch the train, whereupon Skinny stopped, but with a look of regret at the tempting morsels yet on the board.

"I hate to give up," he complained. "It's the nearest thing to a square meal I have had in three days. I feel better than I did, though."

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy. "You want to leave them something for the regular supper, Skinny. You would eat everything in the house, if you had your way about it. Come along."

Billy had taken a little of the supper himself, but his appetite was nothing as compared with Skinny's.

Roger the Rover went with them to the station, where they found Pinon Pete walking up and down the platform as though he intended taking the train when it came, and was impatient.

Billy stepped in and bought tickets, and when he came out, withdrew to the end of the platform to talk with his partners.

Pinon Pete watched them narrowly, while he pretended not to be doing so, but he could not deceive Billy.

The latter had his eyes about him, too, and with better success than the other fellow.

Billy could watch without letting Pinon Pete know that he was doing so.

"I tell you what it is, pard," Billy observed, presently, "there is something in this matter, some way or other. If it's not as we suspected, then it's some other how. Don't turn your heads, but keep your eyes on me."

"All right," said Skinny, "we'll do that; but what have you got hold of now?"

"Why, that Pinon Pete has his eye on us, for good or evil, and is watching us like a cat would watch a mouse."

"All ther good it will do him," put in the old ranger.

"And he thinks he's smart enough to watch us without our knowing it," Billy added. "He makes me tired."

In saying this, Billy was holding out the tickets he had bought and was pointing at them with his finger, as though making some remark concerning them. It was a deception that worked perfectly.

"I'll keep my eye on him a little when you are gone," promised the old ranger. "If thar's anything crooked about him, you bet I'll be aware of it."

"Yes, watch him," Billy advised. "This end of the string is yours, for the present, and you want to take care that it gets into no tangles that you can't pick out with your wits."

"I shall do ther best I can, my son, be sure o' that."

In a few minutes more the train was at hand, and with a parting shake with their old friend, Billy and Skinny got aboard.

Pinon Pete watched still, and evidently wondered at the old man's not accompanying them. But to him he gave little attention. His mind was centered upon the two young men.

He watched them till the train started, but not once did he catch the eye of Broadway Billy, though he was watched in turn.

"Going to Manitou, are, they?" Pinon Pete muttered, when the train had gone. "I'd risk high on a weak hand to know what their business is. But, it won't do to take any chances. I'll telegraph to Milo and put him onto it!"

With that resolve, he stepped hastily into the telegraph office.

"What ther dern do you mean?" questioned the old ranger, under his breath. "I opine I'll take a sly look an' see. No sooner do ther train go, than this galoot slides inter ther telegraph office. If thar's any monkeyin' goin' ter be done, don't fergit ter count yer uncle in."

Roger the Rover, so saying, entered the waiting room and moved near the open ticket-window.

"I want to use the telegraph, Jimmie," he heard Pinon Pete saying.

"All right, fill out your message and I'll rattle it off for you," was the response.

"I want to reach a fellow at Manitou before the train gets there! Can you promise to do that for me?"

"Think I can, and safe enough, if the string don't break."

"All right, I am going to use a cipher, so you want to take care that it is not misunderstood at the other end."

"Oh, I'll take care of that; but what do you know about ciphers?"

"Ha! ha! Pinon Pete may know several things more than folks give him credit for, Jimmie. I happen to know this one thing, anyhow. Don't bother me, now, till I get it in shape."

"No, I won't, for I guess you will want to buckle your mind to it."

There was just a touch of sarcasm in that.

The old ranger had taken it all in, and it interested him.

"Wants ter git a telegraft ter Manitou afore ther train gits thar, do he? I wonder what ther p'izen is afoot, anyhow. Mister Peters, I ruther think I'll have ter gauge my sight ter cover you an' see what you're up to."

Roger had ventured to take a peep in at the window. The agent and operator was attending to his various duties, and the seedy gambler was busily engaged writing at the message desk.

Passengers and others were moving away from the station, and it was soon almost deserted.

Some minutes passed, and then Pinon Pete's voice was heard again.

"Here you have it," he said. "The letters are plain enough for you, but of course you can't make out the meaning. Send it as it is, and you'll have it all right. Can't make a mistake."

"If you're so afraid of it, maybe you had better send it yourself," the agent recommended, half in joke and half in irritation. "Perhaps I might catch on to your deep cipher, and so get at your secret. What do you think about it?"

"I can do that, too, if necessary," was the quiet answer. "I spent six years at the key before I drifted West."

"The deuce you did!"

"Fact. I have read your clickers here many a day when I've dropped in to see you in a friendly way."

"That beats my time. I never thought of such a thing. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I have found it a good secret to keep as long as possible. I wouldn't have let it out now, only that you bantered me."

"Well, go ahead and send it yourself, and prove your claim. There's your chance, now, while the wire is still. If you're telling the truth, you know the call."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to prove it to you, so here goes."

This talk had drawn the old ranger to the ticket-window, and seeing him, the agent inquired what he wanted.

Pinon Pete glanced up quickly, and seeing who it was, a dark look came upon his face.

Old Roger saw that he was in for it, but he was equal to the occasion.

"What is ther price ter Denver?" he inquired.

He was promptly informed.

"An' what time do ther train go?" he further questioned.

The last one had gone, except a night-train, so he decided not to wait around for that.

He turned away from the window, winking his eye at an imaginary "partner," to show how shrewdly he had got out of that, and the agent turned attention to Pinon Pete.

The latter was rattling away at the key, and proving the truth of his claim to being a telegrapher. His call was presently answered, when he proceeded to send his rather lengthy message.

At last it was done, and Pinon Pete rose from the chair with a laugh.

"You thought I couldn't do it," he cried. "No matter, it is done, and now I will settle the score. In case an answer should come, will you get it to me soon as you can?"

These trifling details were soon settled, and Pinon Pete left the office.

On the platform was the old ranger, but he had been there scarcely a second, having just stepped out the door.

He had been listening eagerly, hoping to catch something by which he could profit, but nothing of that nature had been dropped, so he was none the wiser.

Pinon Pete spoke to him as he came out.

"Your young pards has left ye, I see," he said.

"Yas, so they has," was the response. "They took a run down ter Manitou."

"Went on business, I s'pose, eh? Mebby only ter take a climb up Pike's, however. But, that don't matter."

He had dropped into his dialect again.

"Oh, yas, on business, in course," was the response.

"Then they're done with your services as guide, are they? You was askin' ther fare ter Denver."

"It ain't so much that. Thought I mought take a run up thar while I waited, that's all. Mebby they won't be back fer some days."

"Oh, I see. Well, so-long, old man."

"So-long, pard."

But the look the old ranger sent after him had little of "pard-like" affection in it.

"Wanted ter quiz me some, did he?" he muttered. "Little good mought it do him, fer I'm ther wu'st liar in ther Rockies, when I wants ter be."

Rover allowed the man to get some distance ahead, and then made his way in the direction of the hotel.

"I should like ter know what was in that message," he said to himself. "I'd give somethin' ter know, too. I'd ask ther feller at ther office, but that wouldn't do no good, seein' as he don't know no more'n I do."

The old ranger's concern was for the lads, both of whom he had come to regard with the keenest affection.

But he was not the only one interested in the cipher message.

No sooner had Pinon Pete got out of sight from the office, than the agent took the message from the hook and looked at it.

"I wonder what this means, anyhow?" he mused. "There's something up, for Pinon Pete is not the man to monkey with a thing there is nothing in. Wonder what the key to it is. But, hang it, I have figured out ciphers many a time, and this is a long one and ought to be got at easy. I'll tackle it and see, anyhow. The vowels in it will appear oftener than the other letters, and I'll soon arrange them, and then I'll have it. It will be a good joke on Pete; he's so smart. Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SOMETHING LITTLE EXPECTED.

MEANWHILE Billy and Skinny were rolling along toward their destination.

Whether they had hold of a great case or not, of course they could not know. What they did know was, that they had some information regarding the missing young woman.

It was their business to see Mr. Pharaoh Bridgefield and tell him of the discovery they had made. What would follow that, remained to be seen. Perhaps there all interest in the case, for them, would end. Perhaps not, if Billy could do anything toward solving the mystery.

The ride was not a long one.

In due time the train reached Colorado Springs, where a change was made, and in about twenty minutes they were at their destination.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when they stepped off the car at the station, and their first and immediate discovery was that they had landed in a decidedly pretty place.

Will a word concerning Manitou be out of order? It has been called the summer resort ideal. It is a picturesque village in a beautiful valley at the foot of Pike's Peak, abounding in hotels and pretty cottages. Through it dashed the happy and flashing Fountain que Bouille.

Each season it is thronged with people of wealth and fashion, not only of Colorado but of the East as well.

As the lads alighted from the train, a man stepped forward toward them, as if about to speak, but did not do so.

After a swift glance around at the village and its encircling mountains, taking note as mentioned of the beauty of the place, Billy let his eyes rest upon this man near him.

He found him to be a man of thirty or thereabouts, not a bad-looking fellow, but not well dressed. His clothes had a seedy look, as his face had a hungry expression, as though Fortune was not smiling upon him just then. He looked like a man out of luck.

As Billy's eyes met his, the man asked:

"Are you Mr. Whippletop, sir?"

"I'm happy to say I'm not," was Billy's assurance.

"How is that?" the man further asked, wonderingly.

"I don't like the name," Billy declared, smiling.

"Oh, I see."

The man had stepped back a little while speaking, out of the way of the other passengers, and in responding Billy had drawn aside with him.

"And now that you have asked me a question," Billy immediately followed, "let me ask one."

"Fire right ahead," the man invited. "I don't see anybody else who looks as if he might be Whippletop."

He had been watching the other passengers as they alighted.

"I guess he didn't come," suggested Billy. "Can you tell me where Mr. Bridgefield is to be found? Do you know such a person?"

"What, Pharaoh Bridgefield?"

"Exactly."

"Everybody knows him. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes; that's what has brought me here. Where does he hang out?"

"I'm going right to his place now. Fact is, I work for him. See that fine cottage over there? That's his place."

"Then if you are going that way, we'll amble right along with you."

"I am, so come along. Maybe you have brought some word about his missing daughter. If you have, you will be a welcome visitor I tell you!"

"Well, that's what brought us here," Billy acknowledged.

"What have you discovered?"

"That's what I want to see Mr. Bridgefield for, to tell him."

"Oh, I didn't mean to pump you; but you see we are all so anxious abou the young lady."

"No harm done. But, let's be moving."

"Certainly."

With one more look around, the man led the way toward the center of the village.

The man's manner had become decidedly friendly immediately upon his hearing that Billy wanted to see Mr. Bridgefield, and more so when he declared he brought some word of the missing young woman.

"Where do you come from?" the man asked, as they went along.

Billy named the station from where he had just come.

"Over there, eh?" the man commented.

"Yes. And I see the interest in the missing lady is as great there as here, if possible."

"No doubt about it. The old man has offered a reward for information concerning her. Did you see the notice posted over there?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, you may come in for the reward."

"We don't care so much about that, if we can be useful in helping unwind the snarl of mystery. What's your opinion of the case?"

"I don't know. I think she's met with some accident in some wild place."

"Your two statements don't buckle together well, but that don't matter. You may be right in saying that, but I don't agree with you."

"What do you think?"

"Foul play."

"What makes you think that?"

"Something I've discovered. But, you'll hear all about it in good time."

"I can wait. Mr. Bridgefield will no doubt tell me all about it as soon as you have told him."

"Hope he will. Hello! there is a man I have seen before, to day; who is he?"

The man looked in the direction indicated, and Billy fancied that he gave a slight start as he caught sight of the person.

It was a man on horseback, cantering along on a jaded animal, and none other than the leader of the three men who had that day met Billy and his "pards" up on the mountain plateau.

At first he was coming toward them, but turned abruptly off as Billy drew attention to him, and made his way in the direction of the cottage that had been pointed out as Mr. Bridgefield's.

"I guess you know him," Billy immediately added to his question.

"Why?" asked their companion.

"You showed it when you looked. Who is he?"

"Why, his name is Oscar Danton. He is Miss Bridgefield's lover."

"That's it, is it? I guess he's heading for the cottage. I'll be in time to meet him there if we step lively."

"Yes; but the chances are that he won't find the old man at home just now. I think he's at the stable looking after his sick horse. He was there when I went to the station, and it won't be but a step out of the way to find out."

"And where's the stable?"

"Right this way. Come on, and we may find him there."

The man turned abruptly from the board

walk and entered upon a narrower way, Billy and Skinny following.

There had been nothing to arouse suspicion in their minds. It was all so natural in occurrence, one thing with another, that there could not be any suspicion awakened.

That the first man of whom they happened to make inquiry concerning Mr. Bridgefield should be one of the gentleman's servants, was nothing strange. It was only a coincidence, and not at all a striking one.

They continued talking, as they passed along, and in a little time were upon the outskirts of the village.

"Where the dickens is that stable?" Billy now demanded.

"Right there," was the answer, pointing.

The building indicated had the appearance of a stable, and was only a short distance away.

Leading the way across a vacant piece of ground, the man approached it, and as they came near he observed:

"Yes, I guess he is here yet; this side door is unlocked. That opens into his private room in the stable. You see the chain is down."

"Well, find out if he is here," directed Billy, with slight impatience.

"Yes, I will. You can remain out here if you want to—or, better still, come right in with me. Do just as you please."

"We'll wait here," decided Billy, stopping a few feet from the door.

"All right."

The man entered the building by the side door that he had previously indicated, and presently the lads heard him call out within:

"Bob, is Mr. Bridgefield there yet?"

"Yes," was the answer from the rear part of the place.

"Tell him here's two young fellows want to see him. They say they have some information for him."

There was a moment of silence, and then the response came:

"He says bring 'em right in."

Another pause, and the door opened.

"Yes, he's here," they were told. "He says for you to come right in."

Having heard all for themselves, and having no shadow of suspicion—how was it possible to have?—the young men stepped forward.

As they did so, the man in the door drew back to let them enter, and in another moment they had passed into the building. But no sooner were they within, than a remarkable thing happened.

Heavy hands fell upon their shoulders, the cold tubes of grim revolvers were pressed against their temples, the door swung shut behind them quickly, and a voice hissed into their ears:

"Don't speak or move, or you die!"

They were in a trap.

Billy was almost too surprised to speak anyhow, and as for Skinny, he was for the moment too frightened.

"Mind what's told ye," the voice warned. "Don't try no fool game, or we'll bore ye quick. You are our mutton. It's no use your tryin' to get out, fer we has got ther bulge on ye. Gag an' bind 'em, boys. If they utters a peep, I want ye ter bore 'em, an' bore 'em fer keeps. D'y'e hear?"

CHAPTER IX.

FAST IN THE TOILS.

BILLY and his partner were in a fix, and it puzzled the lads greatly to guess what it meant. They could not understand it.

The situation flashed through Billy's mind like lightning. It was reviewed in a second, almost, and in every detail. But the explanation was not forthcoming. Why he had been thus entrapped did not appear.

"Will you allow me to whisper my little protest against this sort of thing?" Billy asked, in low tone, as soon as he could find his tongue.

"We don't want to hear anything out of you at all," answered the man who had been the means of their getting into the trouble. "All you have got to do is to keep as still as you can; we'll do the rest."

Resistance was not to be thought of.

Billy and Skinny had had enough experience in the West to know that the revolver is usually the best trump.

Already they were being bound, and the grim revolvers were still pressing against their temples in a way that was not to be disregarded. The man who has been there knows how it is himself.

"Yes; but I can't keep still—couldn't if I

tried," urged Billy. "I am a fellow that is always on the lookout for reasons, and I'd like to know what the reason is for this. Handle us gently, please, for we don't mean to be unruly. You don't know what good boys we are."

"An' you had better be right up in your good behavior now," spoke one of the rough fellows.

"That's what we always try to be up in," responded Billy. "If there is anything more than another that we pride ourselves on, it is our behavior."

It evidently puzzled the men not a little to see how cool Billy was under the circumstances. He seemed to be taking it all as a matter of course, and did not appear to be particularly anxious about the outcome.

But that was only the outward appearance. He was troubled enough in his secret mind.

Presently the fellows had bound him and Skinny to their satisfaction, and Skinny had been gagged as well.

The little room in which they were was semi-dark, but becoming accustomed to it now, the lads saw that they were in the power of three men.

Not more than a minute had passed since they entered the door, for the men had worked rapidly and well, and now the prisoners were pushed down upon a seat by one of the walls.

The men stood in front of them.

"Now, my lad, look here," spoke the one who had been their decoy.

"We're looking," responded Billy, "but we can't see much. Take that just as you please, too."

"The fellows evidently have some nerve," spoke that rascal, turning to his associates in evil. "This one don't seem to know fear."

"Nary a fear," assured Billy. "But, all the same, I would like to know what all this means, before the procession goes any further. What have we been brought here and made prisoners for?"

"That's just what we want to get out of you," was the return. "We want to ask you some questions before we gag you."

"And see to it that ye don't talk no louder than ye are talkin' now, too," warned another, with wea on still in hand.

"Oh, I'll attend to that part of it," assured Billy. "You'll never ketch me tryin' to ring in a trump when I've got to foller suit—suits me better to foller, ye see. Do ye foller me?"

"You'll be follerred with a club, if ye don't shut up."

"How can I say anything, if I've got to shut up?"

"See here, answer my questions," cried the decoy.

"You haven't asked me any yet, mister."

"You don't give me any chance. Hold your tongue for a second. What was it brought you to Manitou?"

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy exclaimed, "but that's a healthy old question. Why, I'd be shamed to ask that of the infant class. The train brought us here."

"Confound you, no fooling, or I'll kick a lung out of you!"

"That would be a terrible thing to do to a fellow," Billy remarked.

"Then why don't you answer my question?"

"I thought I did."

"Confound you, I want to know what business brought you here."

"Well, you ought to know that already," said Billy. "If you don't, depend on it you know all you will find out."

"You know something about that missing girl?"

"Maybe I do; maybe I don't."

"That is what brought you here, anyhow. Now we want you to tell us what you know. If you don't it won't be well for you."

"Then it won't be well for me, I suppose, for you'll get nothing out of me. You have played me a dirty trick, and I'll not forget it in a hurry. Maybe you'll live long enough to regret it."

"We'll live longer than you are likely to, if you are not careful. I want to tell you that you are in a bad box, and that if you don't get out of it it will be your own fault—"

"Bet your life on that!" Billy interrupted.

"Don't think there's any escape for you. I mean that if you get out of our hands it will depend how you behave yourselves. Now if you will come to terms and tell us what we want to know, we will arrange to let you off easy, as soon as we are safe ourselves."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Well, we want you to show your hand and let us know all you can about this missing girl."

"Is it the reward you are after?"

"Ha! You make a close guess. Yes; we are after the reward."

"I'll give you the price of the reward, if you will let me and my pard go," Billy promised.

"Maybe you have got it about your clothes now."

"You're welcome to all you find in my pockets. I'll sell out for ten dollars cash."

"That's too dear, when we can take it for nothing. We will attend to that later on. Are you going to tell us what we want to know?"

"I hardly think I will," drawled Billy. "You have picked up the wrong man this time, my hearty, and if you don't find it out so before you get done with me, I miss my guess."

"And maybe you will find that Milo Jarvis is no fool, too, before we part company," was the retort.

"That's your name, eh? Well, I hope so, Mr. Jarvis."

"If you knew everything, you would see what a ninny you were to come here to Manitou to rake in a reward that no one is likely ever to have."

"We found a Manitou too many, as it were, eh?" punned Billy.

"Maybe you know what you are talking about."

"I doubt it," Billy laughed.

"Yes; and so do I. Well, if you don't mean to tell us, we will gag you like your pard and leave you here alone to think over it. Maybe in the morning you will be ready to change your mind."

"Go ahead, if you want to," Billy invited.

"All right, boys, serve him the same," Jarvis ordered. "We'll give him time to cool off. Ha, ha, ha! You fell into our hands as slick as grease, my bantams. You little thought that I was laying at the station for you, did you? Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's that?" demanded Billy, jerking his head away from the gag for the moment. "You say you were laying for us?"

"You bet I was. Ha, ha, ba! That will be something for you to think over. Put it into his mouth, boys."

Billy would have liked to carry the talk further, then, but the gag was now forced upon him and speech was cut off.

"Shall we disarm 'em an' go through 'em?" one of the men asked.

"No; we haven't time to fool away now," was the answer. "Let's be going, if you're sure they are secure."

"No gittin' away, you bet," was the response.

"Then come on."

"Yes; but we don't want to leave 'em here, Milo. This is too close to ther outside. They might find some way of makin' a noise."

"Ha! that's so. Bring 'em on in here, and they can make all the noise they like."

He opened another door, disclosing a still darker place beyond, and stepped within.

The other two men took up first Billy and carried him in, laying him on the floor, and then Skinny to keep him company.

"There, that is what I meant to do with them, and it slipped my mind," Jarvis declared. "I have an idea that we shall find them here when we come for them in the morning. Ha, ha, ba!"

Joking coarsely among themselves, the three withdrew, closing and fastening the doors after them.

Broadway Billy's mind was in a whirl. Needless to say Skinny's was no better in that respect. If ever the "pards" wanted the use of their tongues, it was now.

Billy tried hard to guess what it all meant. He could not believe the man had spoken the truth in saying he had been watching for them at the station. It looked more reasonable that it was a scheme to get information from him and Skinny and so get first chance at the reward that was offered.

But thought after thought came into mind to baffle a decision one way or the other.

Looking it all over, it did appear as though it had been pre-arranged.

There had been Jarvis at the station, and Billy remembered how he had stepped forward toward him and Skinny when they got out of the car.

Then, too, when they had been brought to this stable—for a stable it was, but not now used as such, evidently—there confederates had been ready to help in the deception.

Certainly it did look as though it was as the man declared. But, to all that, was the offsetting question, how was it possible that these men could have known of their coming? By what means had they been able to get hold of the lads' intention? Had this Milo Jarvis followed them

all the way on the train? Ha! that must be it, as Billy was forced to conclude. He thought of no other way, but even that idea was puzzling.

CHAPTER X.

SOMETHING SUSPICIOUS.

WHEN Milo Jarvis left the stable, with his two companions, it was to stroll off in the direction of the hills as they talked.

What their conversation was need not be dwelt upon at length. Finally, when it was growing dark, they returned, and Milo alone went to the stable to see how the prisoners were coming on.

He found them as he had expected, securely bound. There was little chance for their getting away, for the men had done their work well.

In order to see them he had to light a lantern, and he found Billy and his lean—rather fat—partner looking blue enough.

"Well, how do you like it?" he asked.

Billy's flashing eyes answered.

"If I thought you would tell me anything, I would take that gag out of your mouth. Would you do it?"

Billy nodded that he would.

"Yes; and maybe you'd do more. Maybe you would let a yell out of you that would bring help. If you did that, by George they would find you dead when they got here. You wouldn't yell but once."

Billy muttered something, but gagged as he was, he might as well not have made any sound at all.

Still, it served his purpose. It made his enemy eager to know what it was he had tried to say. Billy wanted to talk.

"What's that you say?" the fellow demanded. Billy grunted some more.

"Confound you, I'll remove that thing for a minute, but don't you dare to make a sound louder than I'm speaking now. If you do I'll drive this knife into you, clear to the handle."

As he uttered the threat he drew a knife, and next proceeded to remove the gag.

"You want me to tell you something, do you?" Billy immediately exclaimed. "I can do that, you bet. I can tell you that if I get out of here I'm going to make it hot for you, and don't you forget it!"

"Getting tired of staying here, are you? Well, I don't blame you. Maybe by morning you will be ready to tell us what we want to know, and then we'll see about letting you go."

"When you get ready, eh? I'm no chicken. What you get out of me won't give you fever on the brain."

"Starving here for awhile may give you a fever of some sort, though."

There was a groan from Skinny.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy exclaimed, "you have done it now, for sure."

"Done what? What do you mean?"

"You see this partner of mine—plain enough to be seen, nowadays."

"I see him, of course."

"Well, speaking about fevers and starving brought the groan from him that you just heard. That fellow used to be the thinnest boy you ever saw—fact. He was so thin that his clothes was the most there was of him. A short time ago he had mountain-fever, and from that time he has been laying on flesh at the rate of a pound a day. And hungry—*whew!* Well, if you keep him twelve hours without anything to eat, you will have a dead boy on your hands, that's all."

"Then he is likely to die, unless you make up your mind to tell what I want to know."

"Then I'm afraid he'll have to die."

"Maybe be will think different, when he gets pretty hungry. I'll get it out of him."

"Try him, if you think you can. He's considerable fat, but he weighs more ounces to the pound than ever, now, and he's got sand."

"Now, see here," spoke the man, more confidentially, "I've come back here alone to have a private chat with you. If you'll disclose what you know, and take me in with you, we'll dump the other fellows and get the reward ourselves. What do you say? We can work that nicely."

"You must see a good deal of green in my eye," was Billy's response. "Don't take me for a fool altogether, please. It hurts my feelings more than I can tell. I guess you and I understand each other pretty well. Anyhow, I have tried to make you understand me. Once let me get out, and if I don't put the sweater on you I'm a gilly. You'll be sorry you meddled with me."

"But maybe you won't get out."

"That is for you to look out for. This is your

inning. You had better make it a teller while you can, that's all."

With a snort of disgust at his poor success with Billy, the man sprung upon him and forced the gag into place again.

"There, curse you!" he cried. "Lie here and rot, if you want to."

Giving the helpless lad a kick, then, he put out the lantern and went out, securing the doors as before.

"No getting anything out of him," he growled to himself, as he went off in the direction of the busy part of the town. "But, it don't matter. All we want of him is to keep him where he is for the present."

Going on, he entered the main streets leisurely, and ere long was at a telegraph office, where he wrote a message to be sent.

Meanwhile, the man whom Billy had seen and recognized while on his way to the trap into which he had fallen, had gone on to the Bridgefield cottage, and there dismounted.

Before he could open the gate to enter the well-kept grounds, a woman came running down toward him from the house.

"Tell me you have found my darling," she wildly cried. "Tell me, at least, Oscar Danton, that you have learned something concerning her. This awful uncertainty is driving me mad!"

"Would to God that I could tell you something, Mrs. Bridgefield," was the sorrowful response.

"Then you have not found her—have learned nothing—nothing!"

"Not a thing. I am almost discouraged and heartbroken."

"What can have become of her, Oscar?"

"Ab! would that I knew."

"But, she must be found—must be found, Oscar Danton! How can you remain idle a single moment—you who profess to love her so well?"

"There, there, dear Mrs. Bridgefield," spoke the young man, soothingly, "do not take on so, for it will only result in ill for yourself. You know we are doing all that can be done—"

"No, I do not know it, Oscar Danton. If you have not found my child, why are you here? Why do you come without her? Why do you you—"

"Mrs. Bridgefield, under any other circumstances I should resent your insinuations, but I know it is only your grief that makes you speak so. My eyes have not closed since Ora disappeared, and I have been almost fifteen hours in the saddle. No man could work harder than I have worked, and—"

"And you will lie down and sleep, as Mr. Bridgefield is doing, I suppose. Deep must be your grief!"

The poor woman was not to be held accountable for her words, under the terrible strain that her nerves had been put to.

Still, Oscar Danton could not help feeling nettled, and it was only by great effort that he could hold back a sharp rejoinder. He was worn out, body and mind.

"If Mr. Bridgefield is sleeping, gathering strength for another effort, it is a proof of his good sense," was what he said. "It would be better for you if you could follow the example, Mrs. Bridgefield."

He had entered the gate, and they were walking toward the house.

"Sleep! I!" the almost distracted mother cried. "How could I sleep, and the fate of my child unknown? I consider it almost brutal in Mr. Bridgefield to sleep at such a time!"

"Woman can stand more than man, of this sort of thing, madam," Danton responded. "Mr. Bridgefield's grief is as great as your own, but he has not the nerve force you have, and at his age has had to succumb to what nature demands. Woman can to a certain extent disregard these things and live upon her nerve force— But, here comes Mr. Bridgefield himself!"

A man of fifty or so just then made his appearance on the porch, and advanced to meet them.

He was stout, his hair and beard were mixed with gray, and he had now a worn look that evidently was new to him. And his brow grew heavy as he caught the expression on the faces of the others.

"No news yet?" he demanded.

"None whatever, sir," answered Danton, sadly.

"Where have you been? Have you been in the saddle all this time?"

"Yes; I have scarcely been out of it since daylight."

"You must be nearly dead."

"I am pretty well fagged out, but it will not do to stop yet—at any rate not as long as I can keep going at all. Have you telegraphed to every point?"

"Yes; everywhere. And I've sent out notices of reward as well."

"I know; I saw some of them at various places around. How many men have come in to report?"

"Quite a few, but there are many still out. Come in, though, for I have something to say to you in private. Sarah, you will excuse us?"

Mrs. Bridgefield turned pale to the lips.

"You have heard something!" she cried. "You have learned something that you want to keep from me! You shall not keep anything from me—I must know the worst."

"I have heard nothing whatever of Ora, believe me," Mr. Bridgefield said earnestly. "I want to speak to Oscar upon another matter entirely. Come, sir: Mrs. Bridgefield will excuse us."

With that Pharaoh Bridgefield turned and entered the house, and when he had taken polite leave of Mrs. Bridgefield, Danton followed him.

"Close the door," Bridgefield said, when Danton followed him into a room.

The young man did so, and the two sat down, Danton waiting for Mr. Bridgefield to speak.

"Oscar," he presently said, in low tone, "you had a rival for Ora's hand before we came out here."

"You mean Meredith Paynes."

"Exactly. Now do you think he is the kind of man to have done anything of this sort? That is, do you think he can have stolen Ora?"

Danton grew white.

"I do not want to think so," he answered. "I would not want to stake my life on his honor, but I can hardly believe him a knave outright. But, why do you mention him?"

"Because he is here in Manitou. I saw him this afternoon. Now I have not mentioned this thought to a soul but you, and I leave it for you to deal with. I know you will get at the truth of the suspicion."

"Trust me for that."

CHAPTER XI.

OTHER MOVES MADE HERE.

To return to Roger the Rover, at the village where Billy and Skinny had taken leave of him.

When he returned to the hotel, after the train had gone, he fell to musing over the situation, and it troubled him not a little.

"I should like ter know what was in that message," he kept repeating to himself. "I'd give somethin' ter know, too. Blame me if I kin rest easy, fer I'm sure there is a nigger in ther fence somewhere."

Such was the burden of his thinking, and he could seem to get no further.

After supper he moped around, as though at loss what to do with himself, and finally went off to the saloon.

This, he had come to know, was the resort of all the rough characters in the place, and there Pinon Pete seemed to make his headquarters. He half-hoped that he might be able to learn something.

When he entered he discovered Pinon Pete and El Paso Mike in conversation at a table half-way down the room.

Moving in their direction, he was enabled to get a seat just behind them.

He was unobserved by either of them, too, and was thus enabled to overhear what they were talking about.

"But yer hasn't told me what it was ye set me onto the feller fer," El Paso was saying.

"I thought I did."

"But yer didn't, jest ther same."

"Well, I'll tell you now, then," Pinon offered.

"And I want ther facts of it, mind yer," insisted El Paso.

"I wouldn't give you anything else. You see, I had spoken to the fellow, and he gave me some of his tongue. Now if it had been a man I would have followed him then and there, but it wasn't. I couldn't lower myself to fight with a boy, and so I thought I'd let you try it for me."

"Well, it lowered me, an' that's the truth," El Paso declared, grimly. "I was lowered before I knowed what had happened to me. An' I guess it would have been ther same with you, too. I tell yer that feller is jest sot on mainsprings, he is an' when ye touch ther flipper ther fun begins. I'd like ter see you tackle him. Bet it would be all you'd want ter do."

"Bah! What do you take me for? But, I wouldn't hook horns with him, for I would be laughed at. I'd like to know, though, what took them to Manitou."

"Thar's two ways ter find out."

"How are they?"

"One is, ter wait till they come back, an' then bone 'em; the other is, ter go down thar an' find out."

"And there may be a third. You wait here with me a little while."

"All right; but yer must set 'em up ergain."

That one idea seemed to be all the bummer cared about anyhow, to get what drink he could out of his patron.

Some vile stuff was called for, and when it was brought the bummer's share was not long in disappearing. Wedded to it, as it were, it was all he lived for.

The old ranger listened to their talk for a considerable time, laying hold upon every point he could, but there was little in it of interest to our story, so let us pass it over.

Old Roger was thinking about returning to the hotel, when he caught sight of another person in whom he felt an interest.

This personage was the railroad-agent, who had just come in.

He was looking around, as if in search of some one.

"I'll bet he's got a answer fer this heur galoot," thought the ranger. "I'll wait an' see what about it."

But he was mistaken, or soon made up his mind that he was, for while the man clearly saw Pinon Pete, he was looking still further.

Roger sat somewhat out of sight behind the others, but soon the agent's eye caught sight of him, a look of recognition came upon his face, and he motioned to him in a sly way.

"Durn if he don't seem ter want me," the old man said to himself. "I'll foller an' see what's in it, anyhow."

The railroad man had turned immediately and gone out, and to all save a few it appeared as though he had not found the person for whom he was looking.

When Roger the Rover got outside, he found the man awaiting him near the door, and he immediately said:

"I have been looking all over for you, old man. I want to have a talk with you on the quiet."

"Lookin' fer me? Wal, heur I be, so say yer say."

"Let's walk out this way. I think I have something that will interest you, and we don't want to be overheard."

"Lead right on, an' I'm with ye. Mind that there's no foolin' with me, for I'm a bad man to monkey with. But, then, I don't look fer anything o' that sort."

"You needn't, for I'm square. I want to talk about those young pards of yours who went down to Manitou to-night."

"What about 'em?"

"I rather liked that one you called Billy."

"You bet. I'd like ter see ther man what wouldn't like him. He's as good as gold, he is."

"I don't doubt it. Yes, I like him, and I think I can do him a good turn and I'm going to do it. I'm afraid those young fellows are in danger."

Old Roger stopped short.

"What makes ye think that?" he demanded.

"That's what I'm going to tell you. That lad made an enemy of Pinon Pete."

"I know he did; but we think Pete had it in for him anyhow, so it couldn't be helped."

"I suppose not. But, do you know that Pete sent a message to Manitou about as soon as the train had gone?"

"Yas, blast him! An' he sent it in Dutch, or some other furren langwidge that nobody else could make head or tail of. I'd give a dollar ter know what was in that message."

"Well, I know what was in it."

"Yer do? I was goin' ter ask you, but I didn't s'pose it would be any use, an' more so as you couldn't read it no more nor I could. How did yer make it out?"

"It was in cipher, and I went for it and studied out the key."

"Yer don't tell! But what did it say?"

"I have it in my pocket, but we can't read it here in the dark. That don't matter, however, for I have it in my head as well. Working it out word by word, you see I couldn't help remembering it. It was addressed to a fellow named Milo Jarvis, at Manitou, and the wording was about like this: 'Danger ahead. Think some discovery made, and word being taken to the old man. Look out for two young fellows on seven o'clock train, both beardless and boyish looking. Capture them if it costs a leg, and make the black-haired one tell what he knows. Don't let them get to the old man. Make sure of them. Send for me if you think it necessary.'

"There, that was about it, and I guess I've got it word for word. You see your friends are in something of a dangerous fix."

"Battle o' Gittysburg! I should think so! Say, I'm a thousan' times obleeg ter you, young man, and I think I'll set out fer there ter wunst."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Yer wouldn't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you can do more for them by watching Pete, and if he is called there, you can fellow him right to them."

"But s'pose they sends for him in ther night, an' he gives me ther slip."

"They can't get word to him till I open the office in the morning, now, and you can be on hand then. But—"

He did not finish.

"But,—and what else, pard?"

"I was going to suggest stepping over to the station now. I do run in sometimes before going to bed. If there is a message, the fellow at the other end may hear me on the wire and send it."

"Meby you knows what you is talkin' about; I don't. But, if thar is any way of gettin' ther hip-lock onto this dirty business, I want ter git it."

"We'll walk over there, anyhow."

And they set out at once.

"I don't understand what it is all about," the agent observed, "but it is plain enough that these pards of yours are going to Manitou with some information that Pete does not want to have reach the ears of the person he calls the 'old man.'"

"Bet your hat on that; and Billy's guess wasn't fur wrong, as now I kin see plain enough. If I kin trust ye, I'll put ye onto it."

"I guess you can, after what I've told you, don't you think so?"

"Wal, I opine I kin. This heur Pete has had a hand in ther takin' off of that young woman what's missin' from Manitou, an' he knows that we have got onto somethin' about it."

"The Harry you say! He's none too good for it, but I didn't think he was in that. Come on, and we'll trick him if it can be done."

So talking, they soon reached the station, where the agent hurriedly "cut in" the instruments.

They began rattling immediately, and for some seconds he listened to them attentively.

Presently he touched the key and struck off some meaningless dots and dashes, finally giving the signature of his station.

At once, then, a call began to sound.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "I've got a bite, sure, old man. We'll see what it is in one minute."

Getting hold of pen and paper, he "answered," and immediately a message began to be ticked, which he set down upon the paper, word for word as it was spelled out in the mystic characters of the wire.

Finally it was done and signed for, and then dashing down the pen the young man exclaimed:

"This is it, the answer to the one Pete sent. See, it is in cipher, and the words are a jumble of nothing. But, wait, and let me apply the little joker to it, and we shall see what we'll see."

Taking the first message from his pocket, and taking note of numbers he had placed over each letter in it, he began working out this new one by the same rule. It was only a few minutes' work, and finally he straightened up with an exclamation of satisfaction.

CHAPTER XII.

ROGER TAKES THE TRAIL.

"WHAT has yer found?" the old ranger queried.

"We were not wrong in our guess," was the answer. "Your pards are in trouble, sure enough."

"What does ther message say?"

"It is from the fellow Pete sent his message to, this man Milo Jarvis. He says he has got the lads dead to rights, and that they have not seen the old man. He wants Pete to come there at once."

"That's how ther thing stands, be it? Wal, now, they don't want to forget ter count their uncle in, you bet."

"A good deal may depend on you, old man."

"I knows it, my son, an' I'm ready ter tackle it. What are ye goin' ter do with ther message?"

"Well, now, see here: I like that pard of yours, as I have told you already. And I don't like Pete, never did, though I have never had words with him. I'm going to cast my vote on

your side, and help you to get those lads out of the hole they are in."

"Bully fer you! That's ther kind of talk I like ter hear. If yer means it, what would you say is ther best thing to be done?"

"Don't doubt that I mean it. My action ought to be proof of that. Have you any plan?"

"My plan is ter amble to Manitou, ter see if I can't balk these skunks."

"That's a good idea, but a poor plan unless you go at it right."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Suppose you go to Manitou, how will you find these lads? It is not likely that you could find them at all, and you would not know this man Jarvis from Adam's brother-in-law."

"That's so, that's so."

"Well, now, hear my idea on that point."

"Let's hear it, by all means. I don't reckon I'm a detective."

"Nor am I one, but it seems to me that this is about the best thing to be done under the circumstances: I will go and deliver this message to Pete, and you follow me, but keep out of sight. Then, from that time, do not take your eyes off the man for a second. He may take his horse and set out for Manitou, and if he does that, your only hope will lie in following him."

"Smoke o' Gittysburg! but ye have hit it right on ther head ther first crack. That is jest what I'll do, you bet."

"Have you a horse?"

"No; and don't want none. My legs is hoss enough fer me. Reckon I kin keep pace wit' him as fast as he is likely ter travel."

"That is for you to look out for. Well, let's go over."

"I'm with yer."

The operator put out the light, and they set out for the saloon.

On the way the old ranger stopped at the hotel, to say to the proprietor that he might be absent a day or two, and directing him to give the horses the best of care till the return of himself and friends.

When they came near the saloon they stopped.

"Now," spoke the agent, "I will go in alone, and you can watch through a window. You can make up your mind how he takes the message."

"Let's step to the windy, an' see if he are still thar."

"That's a good idea."

They approached one of the windows and looked in. Their man was still there, talking with El Paso.

"Yas, thar he be," whispered the old ranger. "Now you go in, an' I'll stay right here an' keep my eye on him."

"Very well. Don't lose sight of him, or you may lose him."

With that the younger man turned away and entered the saloon, looked around for a moment as though he had no real knowledge Pinon Pete was there, and seeing him, went forward to where he sat.

"Hello, Jimmie, what now?" Pete greeted.

"Answer to your message," was the reply, and he delivered it.

"Ha! this is good!" Pete exclaimed. "How did you happen to get it so late?"

"That explains it," was the response; "happened to. Went into the office a little while ago, and rattling the key a moment, got a bite. You know how it is."

"You bet."

Pete had now opened the message, and was studying it out.

"Good enough!" he presently exclaimed. "This brings me good news, Jimmie, and much obliged to you. I've been fishing for a certain pointer, and now I've got it. I'll have to run down to Manitou to-morrow."

"Glad to hear it, if it means good luck for you," observed the agent. "Your cipher is a sticker to receive by ear; I'd rather have words I can understand, and then I can be sure of making no mistake. It must be something highly important, that you have to use cipher."

"I'll tell you, Jim; it's something we don't want any one at Manitou to know about, you see. When I come back I'll tell you all about it."

"Oh, it's none of my business; I didn't hint that I wanted to know. Well, good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night, Jimmie. See you again some more another time."

With that playful response, and a wave of the hand, the seedy gambler allowed the agent to take leave, and he turned again to El Paso.

The old ranger, near the window, was observing all that took place.

When the railroad man came out he passed around to where Roger stood, and observed:

"Well, he's got it, and if I don't miss my guess he means to set out for Manitou between suns. Keep your eye on him well, old man."

"Don't be afeerd on that score, my son. If he means harm to them ar' two boys o' mine, he'll find me a sticker in his wool, an' don't forget it. I have my eye on him, an' thar it will stay."

A word or two more, and they parted.

Roger retained his place at the window, and allowed nothing to escape his notice.

Pinon Pete and El Paso Mike talked for a little while, and finally Pete acted as though he wanted to break away.

At first it did not seem easy to do, for the bummer stuck closer than a brother, but finally, when a bottle of the popular poison had been provided for his use, Pete was rid of him.

He passed immediately out, and then it was that the old ranger took up the trail in earnest.

Pinon's first move was to go to the hotel.

He hung around there for a little time, speaking to one or two, but never a word concerning his business in hand.

The old man never lost sight of him, and was successful in keeping out of sight himself at the same time. And so they kept it up till the hour was quite late.

At last Pinon Pete went in the direction of the lower end of the village, and there entered a stable. In a few minutes he came forth with a horse, saddled and bridled, and mounting, rode silently away to the south.

After him went a shadow, as tireless as though that shadow were his very own. It was Roger the Rover, and hard it would be for the rascal to shake him off. But then he had no suspicion that he was being followed, and least of all by a man on foot. That was the last thing he would have thought of.

For the present we take our leave of them.

After the interview with Mr. Bridgefield, to change for a moment, Oscar Danton left the cottage and made his way to one of the fashionable hotels.

He was well known at the Springs by this time, and had the entrance everywhere. But this was the hotel where he was stopping, so he was particularly at home here.

When he went in he stepped immediately to the office.

The clerk spoke to him, and Danton making some remark in response, turned his attention to the ledger.

"When did this person come here?" he presently asked, indicating a name.

It was the name of Meredith Paynes.

"Yesterday forenoon," was the response, as soon as the clerk had looked. And he mentioned his room.

"Strange that I have not seen him. I know the gentleman, and have only just learned of his arrival. Where does he keep himself?"

"Why, he has been around to-day quite a little. You are the one who has been off. By the way, any news of the missing young lady?"

"Not a thing."

"Strange."

"More than strange. But, this man, where did he keep himself yesterday? I was not away then, and I saw nothing of him."

"Well, maybe there was something peculiar about his actions, but I don't know that there was. He might have met a friend and have been taken charge of for a time. I can't say."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, the man was not seen here, to my knowledge, after he registered, till some time this forenoon. He did not occupy his room."

Danton was thoughtful.

"It does look peculiar," he remarked. "But, is the gentleman in his room at present?"

"I think he is. I will send up and ascertain—"

"It is not necessary. I can knock at his door as I go up. Much obliged to you."

A usual response, which Danton did not wait to listen to, and in a moment he was at the door of the room occupied by the man who had been his rival.

He knocked, and the door was opened by a young man of about his own age, good-looking and rather stylishly dressed. And at sight of Danton, his face flushed painfully.

"Oscar Danton!" he exclaimed.

"As you see, Meredith Paynes," was the response. "May I come in?"

"Yes; since you ask the privilege; but not as a friend. I do not forget that you are my hated rival."

"You are frank about it, anyhow," remarked Danton, as he entered and helped himself to a chair. "And I am glad you mentioned that, for it is of that very thing I want to speak."

"Very well, say whatever you have to say. I will listen to you. But first let me ask you a question, for you are the one most likely to know. Has anything yet been learned concerning Miss Bridgefield? You will pardon my asking you, but under the circumstances I think you can do that readily enough."

CHAPTER XIII.

A WILL AND A WAY.

DANTON looked his rival in the eyes squarely for some seconds before replying to his inquiry.

Paynes met the stare boldly, and awaited.

"I will answer that, and frankly, if you will first answer me one question in like manner," Danton presently spoke.

"Ask your question," Paynes invited.

"What brought you here to Manitou?"

"The same that brought you here, undoubtedly. I came here to make one more effort to win Ora Bridgefield's hand."

"It is enough. No; nothing has been heard of her, and my errand here was to find out whether or not you could have had a hand in her disappearance."

"I! Danton, I've a mind to floor you!"

"Two can play at that game."

"Why would you suspect such a thing of me?"

"We are rivals. I have been accepted, and you are left. As a last resort, a man in that situation might steal the object of his love and try to force himself upon her. That is the whole of it, right out plain."

"And hang your impudence! What right have you to suspect so foul a thing of me? What can lead you to it? You tempt me to strike you."

"Don't do it. Keep cool, and let's face it without high words. You came to this hotel yesterday forenoon. From that time till this morning your whereabouts is surrounded with mystery. During that time Miss Bridgefield disappeared."

Meredith Paynes was thoughtful.

"There is something in that," he presently acknowledged. "I can readily understand your suspicion. I might suspect you under like circumstances. But, Oscar, I swear to you that I know nothing whatever about the young woman. And if I could by any means solve the mystery, believe me I would do it. What more can I say?"

"Tell me where you were yesterday and last night, and I'll be satisfied."

"Easily told, and as easily proved, if necessary. I fell in with young Warde about as soon as I arrived, and you know what chums we used to be. Nothing would do but I must spend the day and night with him at his hotel. I was there, and nowhere else, and I have told you the truth."

"Very well. I accept it as such, and apologize. I believe you."

"And that leaves us just what we were—hated rivals. I have no love for you, Danton, and if I can win that prize from you, I am going to do it."

"If you had all the honor you ought to have, being a gentleman, you would accept your fate and have done with it. Ora Bridgefield is my promised wife, and if you attempt to come between us you will regret it, that's all."

And Danton wheeled sharply and went out, shutting the door forcibly and cutting off whatever retort was being made.

No sooner was he out of the room than Paynes smiled.

"Thinks I have stolen the girl, eh?" he said to himself. "He had a nerve, to come here and tell me so to my face, anyhow. Well, let him find her, and if there is no other way open I may resort to that. Ha, ha, ha!"

There was something free and easy about his manner, and lighting a cigar, he sat down at an open window to enjoy the wholesome air.

And in the mean time Oscar Danton was making his way back again to the Bridgefield cottage.

He was nearly tired out, but he could not stop while anything could be done.

By this time Mrs. Bridgefield was wild in hysterics, and had been taken to her room and was detained there under the care of her servants and a doctor.

Pharaoh Bridgefield was pacing to and fro in the hall, eagerly awaiting the return of his prospective son-in-law, and the young man's step had no more than sounded on the steps than the door was opened.

"Well?"

That was the eager inquiry, and it expressed everything.

"Nothing," was the answer as brief.

Danton entered and they went into a room, where the young man told all about the interview he had had.

"Then you don't believe he had anything to do with it."

"I do not believe he had," was the answer.

"What in the name of Heaven is going to be done?"

"Everything has been done that can be. You have no word yet?"

"No. Men have been coming in every little while, but the report is always the same. My wife is nearly crazy, and I shall go mad if our child is not found soon."

"And I am almost in despair. I am going now to the telegraph office, and I will induce the operator to keep it open all night at any cost. I believe I will spend the night there, catching what sleep I can till daylight."

"And in the mean time my daughter may be in the hands of vile ruffians— My God! Danton, I can't stand this awful strain!"

"Is there anything you can suggest?"

"Not a thing. We have done everything."

A brief consultation, and Danton went away, leaving Mr. Bridgefield still pacing the hall.

But, what of Broadway Billy and Skinny, since we saw them last, after the visit of Milo Jarvis for the last time, as related?

When Jarvis went out, after gagging Billy and giving him a parting kick, as shown, he thought he was leaving him as he had found him in all respects, but he was somewhat mistaken.

The moment the gag had been forced partly into his mouth, Billy had shut his teeth down upon it hard, and the result was that it was not more than half as tight as it had been in the first place. In his haste Jarvis had noticed nothing of this trick.

He had pulled the thing tight enough in tying it, but Billy's teeth had been the means of holding it.

It was not so slack, however, that Billy found it easy to rid himself of it, for he had to work long and hard before he got it out of his mouth.

In his twisting about he finally came into contact with a sharp nail that protruded through the side of the board partition, and this proved his best friend in the emergency.

But in the mean time a couple of hours had elapsed, and it was getting well on into the evening.

That nail found, Billy hooked the gag upon it, with care, and by giving a steady, careful pull, soon had it out of his mouth.

"Sweet pertaters!" he ejaculated in whisper, "but I thought I'd never get it out, loose as it was. Now the next thing is something else. Are you alive, Skinny?"

A groan answered him.

Skinny had made a few efforts at getting free, but had given up in despair, and for an hour not a move or sound had been heard in his direction.

"All right, fat one," Billy tried to cheer. "I have got my tongue free, and that is a big step in the right direction. There's hope for us yet, you bet! Roll over here and let me try my teeth on that gag of yours."

Skinny rolled.

"I hadn't heard a move out of you in so long that I was afraid you must have starved to death," Billy joked. "And I suppose you are mighty near to it, Skin, and that's the fact. I'll bet you have lost ten pounds this night."

Skinny gave vent to some grunts of impatience, and Billy, wiggling around till his teeth came into contact with the gag, set at work.

It took a considerable time, but at last it was accomplished, and Skinny, too, had the use of his tongue.

"Great ginger!" he exclaimed, thickly, "my jaws are 'most paralyzed. If I'd had to keep that thing in my mouth all night, it would 'a' killed me."

"Haven't any doubt about it, pard. With that thing there, you couldn't get in any bread or meat, and twelve hours without the staff of life would settle you. But, if your jaws are stiff, just limber them by trying to untie my hands. I'm tired out."

So, throwing himself over upon his face, Billy proceeded to rest while Skinny set at work with his teeth.

Now that the way had been opened, Skinny was more than willing to do his part, and set to work with a will to free the hands of his patron saint.

But it was hard work, doubtful work, and

many times the now fleshy lieutenant had to stop and rest while he caught his breath for further efforts. But he did not give up.

Tired at last of trying to undo the knots that he could not get hold of with any degree of satisfaction, he set about chewing the cords off, doing it with a hearty will. And this proved the right thing. In less than half an hour longer the first cord was cut.

From that point it was easier, and soon after that Billy had the use of his hands.

"Skinny, you're a jewel!" he cried.

"I'm almost dead, that's what I am," was the weak response.

"Get out! There's plenty of life in you yet. Now we have got the bulge on 'em, and if we don't make things hum you can kick me."

"We ain't out of the woods yet."

"No; but we have got where we can see the clearing ahead, and if we ain't soon over the fence it will be funny. Here, let me set you free, my gay and festive grub annihilator."

With his knife Billy speedily cut Skinny's bonds, and then his own, and they felt like new fellows.

"And now to get out of here," urged Skinny. "Don't let's get caught again if we can help it. If you had listened to me, Billy, we wouldn't have got into this fix."

"I agree with ye, Skin; but it's no use your throwing that up to me now. I had the fever, and when I have the fever there is no use your talking to me, not a bit o' use."

"But I hope you've had enough now, and that you'll drop the case and get out while we can."

"Drop it! Not by a good deal. Why, we have just got the right start, and I'm 'shamed of ye to think you'd say drop it. Nixey! We are goin' to see it out now, Skinny, if it takes the hair off."

"But, they'll kill us, and—"

"Still croakin', eh? More wet blanket to throw on me, have you? You might as well save your breath, I tell you. Here we are, free and armed, and with our boots on. If we couldn't make it hot for them I'd like to know why, that's all. Let them come and see us now, Skinny, and see what a ruction there will be."

"But, let's get out."

"There's sense in that, pard, and I'm with you. If you haven't fattened too much since we came in I guess the door will be big enough for you, so we'll try that way first. Look sharp, now, and see if you can see in the dark."

CHAPTER XIV. COMING TO A FOCUS.

THE lads were now free, so far as the use of limbs was concerned, but they were none the less prisoners.

They knew the doors were locked, and there might be considerable of trouble for them yet before they could get out. But they felt that they had the best of the situation now.

They were armed, and should their captors return to pay them another visit they would meet with a warm reception.

In response to Billy's remark, Skinny said he thought they would have to do their seeing by the sense of feel, and that they set about doing.

They tried the door, and it was locked, as they had known before.

From there they groped around the wall in different directions, till finally an exclamation escaped Billy.

"Sweet pertaters!" he cried, in a whisper. "Skinny, here's the lantern. Funny we didn't think of that."

"But it won't do to light it, Billy."

"Why not?"

"The light might be seen, and we'd get into trouble."

"Would, eh? Skinny, if anybody comes fooling around here now the trouble won't be one-sided, you bet."

"Then you're goin' to light it?"

"Sure, if I can find anything to light it with."

There was a moment of silence, while Billy searched his pockets, and then the flash of a match dispelled the darkness.

The lantern was lighted, and the two pards looked at each other and then around at their prison cell. And they found it a tighter place than they had thought.

"It looks as if it had been built on purpose for a jail," suggested Skinny.

"Reckon it has been a lock-up for feed and grain," Billy guessed. "Anyhow, it is a bad place to get out of."

"I'm afraid you're right. But, what time is it?"

Billy glanced at his watch.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed. "It's after one!"

"So it was; and Roger the veteran had been nearly two hours on the trail following Pinon Pete toward Manitou.

"Who would have thought it!" ejaculated Skinny. "But, we was a good while gettin' free, and I was so hungry that I knew it must be gettin' on."

"That bread locker of yours is no good as a clock any more," declared Billy. "It is like a Windaberry—forever running down. But, how are we going to get out of this box, Skinny?"

"I don't believe we are going to get out in a hurry, and that's the truth."

"It looks that way, but it won't do to be idle."

"Why not settle down here till they come to visit us again, then get the drop on them before they know it."

"We'll do that if there is no other way. But, you see, we might drop asleep while we waited, and they would have the bulge on us. It won't do to fall asleep for a minute, fat one."

They looked around their den with careful search.

There was but the one door, and that looked to be a very heavy one, to judge by the array of clinched nails that showed on the inner side.

At one end was a large feed-box, lined with zinc throughout. At the other end were stored some stable tools of the ordinary sort. Besides these there were some boxes, all empty, and that was about all.

It looked like a desperate undertaking.

Billy was quick to take in the situation as a whole, and to find whatever chances presented themselves.

"I don't see but one thing to-do, Skin," he remarked.

"And what's that?"

"To cut through the door with our knives."

"That will take us till daylight, and it will be work for nothing. The fellows will get back before we are done."

"I don't know about that. It will take some time, of course, but if we get out an hour before daylight it will be a big thing for us. Then we can disguise and go to work."

"Well, we'll try it, anyhow, if you say so."

"And that's what I do say."

Finding a place for the lantern, where they could have the best of its light upon their work, the lads gripped their knives and went at it with a will.

They had decided to cut the lock out bodily.

At first it had been their thought to make simply a hole through which to put a hand to reach the lock upon the outside. But as they could not be sure they would find the key in it, it might be labor in vain.

By this plan, once the hole was through the door must open, provided that the one lock was the only fastening that held it. And upon this plan they set at work, and an hour later found them still at it, though blisters were beginning to appear on their hands, and their arms were aching terribly.

"I'm about ready to give up," Skinny finally declared.

"Never say die!" cheered Billy. "Now that we have done so much, it would be foolish to give up. Half an hour more and we'll be through."

"I know; but I am about crippled."

"Well, take a rest, then. We are in each other's way, anyhow, now. I'll try it alone for a time."

This Skinny was willing to do.

Though he was well again, and had more flesh than he had ever had, yet he had not fully regained his strength.

Billy worked on, steadily, and finally success crowned his efforts. With a blow of his fist he sent the block flying away on the other side, and the door swung open.

"We have got thar, Eli!" he cried.

"Bully for you!" exclaimed Skinny. "Only for you it wouldn't been done. Now we'll get out, sure."

"You bet we will!" cried Billy, "even if we have to cut through another door to do it. I'll take a look around, and then we'll put out the light."

He stepped out and took a survey of the other apartment.

"It's all right," he announced. "Here's a window, and if we can't get out by that we don't deserve to get out at all."

Taking his bearings carefully, he put out the light, and Skinny followed his lead to the window.

They found it fastened, but it was only with a nail over the top, which was soon removed, and

the cool night air was joyously received as it rushed in upon them when the window was raised.

"Now for a box," exclaimed Billy, and he set about getting it.

Placing the box under the window, he told Skinny to go first, and as soon as he was out, Billy followed and the window was closed.

"Give me your hand!" Billy cried in delight. "If that wasn't well done, then I never had a grandmother, that's all."

"It was a lucky escape, and that's so," Skinny agreed. "And now don't you think we had better draw out and leave the thing alone?"

"Lucky escape! Luck had nothin' to do with it, Skin. It was pluck and hard labor, that's what it was. And as to giving it up—nary a time. We have got to have our innin now."

While they were talking, debating what had better be their next move, they fancied they heard voices, and a hasty look around revealed the shadowy forms of several men approaching, and they had just time enough to dodge around the building before they were discovered.

"Sweet pertaters! but that was a close shave," whispered Billy. "I'll bet it's our enemies coming to pay us another visit. Won't there be a time when they find us gone!"

"And there'll be more of a time if they discover us here," warned Skinny. "We had better slope off in this other direction."

"Not any, pard. We may hear something that will do our ears good. We will stay and see it out if it costs a tooth and a button. We are into this game now to win, you bet."

The men came forward at a rapid stride, and there were four of them.

This the lads made out as they peered around the corner of the building to take in the situation.

It was light enough to see forms distinctly, but not to recognize the features, unless very near by, and then not perfectly.

The men came on to the door, where they stopped, and as one fumbled with a key to find the lock he was heard to observe:

"This is where they are, Pete, and you bet they're safe enough."

"Did you put 'em in the tight room?" was asked.

"You bet," was the response.

"Then they are safe. We'll soon make them talk, now."

The door was now opened, and they passed in. And as they did so another dark form crept stealthily out of the darkness, and came forward.

"Sweet pertaters!" whispered Billy, "thicker and more of it!"

"He's a spy after 'em, sure," Skinny guessed.

At that moment came a howl from within. The escape had been discovered.

There were raving and swearing, and the man who had been called Pete went on like a crazy man.

"Hang me fer a herring if I don't know that voice!" Billy suddenly whispered to his partner. "If it isn't Pinon Pete I'm a p'izen pirate! Skinny, it is gettin' mighty interestin'."

"That's who it is, sure," Skinny agreed. And with the next breath added the warning, "Look out!"

The fifth person, the one who had come to the door after the others had entered, had dodged back from the door now, and was coming toward the corner where the lads were.

Discovery was certain, and with a quick move Billy had his revolvers in hand, ready to get the best of the situation.

He and Skinny drew back a yard or so, and the man jumped around the corner and stopped.

It was darker there, and his only object was plainly to keep out of sight.

He had been gone too soon, either, for at the same moment the others came out of the stable, still cursing.

"What is goin' to be done?" one was heard to question.

"The game is up," declared the one called Pete. "These fellows have given us the slip, and our only plan of safety is to get out."

"Too bad we didn't kill them at sight," muttered the one who had decoyed the lads into the trap. "They will have the best of it, now, if they have a mind to push it. Do you think they will, Pete?"

CHAPTER XV.

TRACKED TO THE SECRET.

"PETE" prefaced his reply with a string of curses.

"Of course they will!" was what he finally led up to. "Wasn't they coming here to see the old man anyhow?"

"Yes; but maybe they will scare off, seeing the fix they got into. I'll bet they are a mile from here, in the direction of Denver. I think we'd better hold out and see."

"And get bagged, eh? Not any in mine. I know when the chance is to be risked and when not, you bet. We have got to slope, and that settles it. Curse it! you couldn't have secured the fellows half as well as you claim you did, or they would be here."

"Ask the others if we didn't," was the retort. "It is a puzzle how they got loose. I could swear they didn't do it without help."

"All the more reason, then, for our dusting out while we can. But, we had better do our talking inside."

Their talk ceased instantly, and they disappeared into the building.

"Smoke o' Gittysburg!" whispered the man at the corner, "but they is a p'izen lot, sure enough. I wonder whar them boyees is?"

Billy recognized the voice and words instantly, as did Skinny, and a thrill of delight passed through them both. It was their old friend, Roger the Rover! How had he come there?

But a second's thought made it clear to Billy. He must have followed Pinon Pete.

It was highly desirable that the lads should make their presence known to the old ranger, but it was a risky thing to do, for it was likely to bring about some word or sound that would arouse those within.

Billy was scarcely two yards from him, and he chirped like a cricket to draw attention.

The ranger turned his head immediately, and as he did so Billy whispered:

"Is that you, Rover?"

"Thank ther Lord!" was the hearty response, in like cautious whisper.

Billy lowered the weapon he had lifted almost into the old man's face, as an extra precaution to silence, and the pair grasped hands.

Explanations were exchanged in a few hurriedly whispered words, and then Billy remarked:

"Now, we must hear what these men have to say. "We mustn't let them get out of our sight, and if they give us any clew to work on, we must go to work with a will."

"I'm with yer, lad, boots an' spurs. I have trotted an' tramped all ther way heur, an' I don't want to have that work fer nothin'. We must capture ther skunks if it is in ther blood."

"And we will, too, or they will capture us," was the grim response. "Come, we must hear all we can."

Their talk had been in the most guarded tones, and now they left the end of the building where they had taken refuge, and drew near the door and window.

Each of them had his weapons ready in hand, and it would have been a bad triangle for the rascals to have run up against in the dark. The three friends had now the best hand in the game.

The ranger and Skinny stopped at the window, while Billy crept on to the door, which had been left slightly open.

Their enemies were in the inner room, and had just lighted the lantern, leaving its light very low.

"Curse them, see here!" Billy heard Milo Jarvis mutter. "See how they have cut their way out, will you!"

"What! didn't you disarm them?" Pinon Pete demanded.

"No; we had to hurry, and as we tied them up so well we didn't dream of it being necessary."

"And you see now how well you tied them. I thought you knew better than that, Milo."

"And so did I. But, there is no use crying over spilled milk, you know."

"Well, what is going to be done?"

"We have got to give it up and get out, that's the only safe thing."

"But, we may be running away from a shadow. Hadn't we better wait and see if the lads are around to-morrow? I rather think they have dusted out before this, and that we'll never see them again."

"You may be right, but we don't know it."

"Then you are willing to throw up the whole job?"

"Yes, and glad ter do it, too. I tell you it has got too hot for comfort."

"But, what about the fair one?"

"We'll have to let her go."

"And not try the game at all?"

"Not with me in it, you bet! It has got too hot, and I want a cooler clime just as soon as I can find one."

"And how will you let her go?" Milo persisted. "Set her free and let her find her way home the best she can?"

"I don't see any other way, do you?"

"I think I do."

"What is it?"

"Well, I happen to know those lads haven't been gone long from here. If we had been less than half an hour earlier, we would have caught them."

"Ha! how do you know that?"

"That's what I'd like to know, too," thought Billy, as he listened.

"Easy enough," answered Jarvis. "When I took up the lantern to light it, it was warm yet."

"The deuce you say! Then the lads can't be a long ways off, after all."

"But they are gone, none the less. Now, what I was going to say is this: If we set out right away, we won't be seen, and we can take the fair one off further yet, and still carry out our designs."

"That's not bad; but I tell you it is a heavier case than I ever dreamed it was going to be."

"Nothing risked, nothin' had," commented Jarvis.

They talked on until two things were plain enough to Billy and his backers. One was, that these rascals knew where Miss Bridgefield was. The other, that they were afraid to make any move in the matter."

But their talk was so guarded, whether by chance or design, that it was hard to get at a correct understanding of the case by means of it.

"Well, whatever we do, must be decided on now," Jarvis finally urged.

"That's ther fact of it," agreed the minor rascals.

"And as you are the boss, Pete, it is for you to say," Jarvis finished.

"Do you think we could make it work?"

"What work?"

"Taking her off further and holding her longer."

"Why not? The biggest risk has already been run, and we ought to have pay for it all."

"But, it ought to be done now, while the thing is at white heat."

"And we dare not try it. No; let's wait. It won't cost us much to hold off a little, and we can take care she don't get away from us."

"Well, it must be done before daylight, and there's not a minute to be lost. The hills will swarm as soon as it is light. Let's be about it. We can find some other place for the present."

"There's no time to be lost. We must move now. And we'd better go on foot, for horses might draw attention. Come."

They were heard to move, and the three watchers withdrew around the building with all haste.

Soon the four schemers emerged, and went off the way they had come, walking rapidly.

As soon as prudent, after them stalked the detective trio.

The secret would soon be theirs, if they were successful in following without being discovered.

The scoundrels passed silently through the village, out along one of the roads beyond, and so on and into the hills, and like shadows followed their foes.

It is unnecessary to dwell upon the details of the keen tracking the old ranger and his younger pards were called upon to do, nor the incidents by the way. The end finally came, after a walk of over two hours' duration.

The last part of the way, a mile or more, had been over a rugged, unbroken side hill, where there was neither trail nor sign of trail. And the destination proved to be a rude cabin away over on the other side from the main trail, where no one would have expected to find such a thing.

At this cabin the four villains stopped and knocked.

Billy and his pards had stopped at a safe distance, behind some rocks, for daylight was just breaking.

Presently there was a response from within the cabin, a few words were exchanged, the door was opened and the men filed in. And at once then Billy and his help advanced.

Gaining the end of the cabin, they listened, weapons in hand.

"What is it ye want?" asked a woman's voice, cracked and squeaky. "What has brung ye so 'arly?"

"We've got to move," answered Pinon Pete. "It ain't safe here any longer, and we've got to hunt new quarters."

"You are purty 'arly," the cracked voice piped, "but you ain't 'arly enough fer that. It is gettin' daylight, ye see. Yer will have ter lay low here till dark comes again."

"Would it be safe, Milo?" Pete questioned.

"Safer than to try it, now that it's coming light," was the reply.

"Well, then, stay here till dark it is," Pete decided. "And I'm not sorry, for I'm played out."

"Same here," declared Milo. "We'll drop right down and sleep, Selina, old gal, and you can have somethin' to eat when we wake up."

Suddenly another voice was heard, a sweet, womanly voice, but one in greatest sorrow.

"Oh, men—if men you are," it cried, "have mercy on me and let me go, I beg of you. If your object be gain, I will pay you a thousand dollars for my liberty. I will mail the money in cash to any address you choose to give me."

"That's ther talk!" exclaimed one of the minor rascals.

"She'll have ter add a couple o' hundred extra fer this bullet she guv me," another voice growled, sleepily.

"It won't do," Pinon Pete decided. "The old man wouldn't allow it, and he'd only use the letter as a decoy. No; we ain't so green as that. We'll attend to it in our own time and way, miss."

The girl urged her offer, vowing that she would certainly do as she promised, but it was of no use, and she was soon ordered to keep still that the ruffians might sleep.

CHAPTER XVI.

RESCUE AND REWARD.

BROADWAY BILLY, Skinny and the old ranger withdrew to a distance to hold a council of war.

Now, they knew, had come the decisive moment, or hour. Upon them would depend everything. And they were determined not to fail.

They were the only ones who had got at the secret, and it was their own by right of discovery. What they wanted was to make a complete case of it without any help whatever.

And this they would have to do now, since the whole matter rested upon themselves.

"I'll tell you what it is, pard," spoke Billy, "it is going to be touch and go, when we make our move, and the best side will win. But we will have the advantage on our side, even if they do have numbers on theirs."

"Right you be, thar," admitted the veteran, "They will be asleep in ten minutes, or less, an' then will be our time to scoop 'em in. It will do me good ter git 'em dead to rights, too, after ther p'izen deeds they have been guilty of. We must not fail, Billy."

"Sweet pertaters, no!"

"I believe the fever is gettin' hold of me, too, now," Skinny had to confess. "I want to have a hand in this when the time comes."

"There's no flies on you, Skinny, when it comes to the pinch," complimented Billy. "You shall do your share, and get satisfaction for your long fast, you bet."

"But, what is your plan, my son?" asked the old man.

"That's jest what I am tryin' to rake up out of the chaff in my think box," Billy declared, scratching his head. "If my top-piece was only filled with brain instead of mush, life might have more charms for me than it has."

The others smiled and waited.

"I'll tell you what," Billy finally announced. "We'll draw as near to the cabin as we can—take our stand right at one end of it. There we'll wait till it is broad daylight, so that we can see what we're doing. By that time they will all be as sound asleep as the dead. Then, when it is so light that we can't make any mistakes, and can't be fooled, we'll pounce in upon 'em and take 'em or kill 'em."

"That's jest ther plan," the old man agreed. "But we wants ter know jest what part each one is ter play."

"Well, Skinny and I will cover 'em and drop 'em, too, if need be; and you can attend to making prisoners of 'em."

"Good enough; that fills ther hull pan right up."

Looking well to their weapons, they advanced stealthily to the end of the cabin and there waited.

Nothing was heard, save snoring and the occasional sob of the young woman who was held prisoner in so mean a place, and the time passed rapidly.

When it was quite daylight, then Billy gave the signal to move.

Like one they advanced silently to the door, and Billy tried it. It was unfastened, and he opened it a little.

That done, he stopped to see that the others were ready at his back, and throwing the door open wide, he bounded into the room with a whoop.

Immediately every man there was awake and springing to his feet, but it was too late to avail them anything, for Billy and his pards had them covered.

"Up with your hands, every one of you!" the young terror to evil-doers cried, his voice ringing like a bugle sounding the charge. "The first man who resists, goes down!"

"Bet yer life on't!" echoed the old ranger. "Up with 'em, an' no foolin' about it!" I aches to shoot, I do!

It took the cowardly wretches but a moment to see that it would be useless for them to resist, and their hands went up, every one.

"That shows your good sense," said Billy. "Now keep them there, or a lump of lead will find a tender spot in you before you can wink your eye. This is our inning, and we're going to get there if it costs blood to do it."

The old ranger had his cords already prepared and was speedily at the work assigned to him, and in about one minute all four of the detestable rogues were securely bound. Then the same was done for the woman who had been keeping guard over the prisoner.

On a bunk in one corner was a fifth man, who had one arm all bandaged up, but he made no offer to resist, and was taken care of last of all.

During this time there had been wild cursing from them all, mingled with fervent thanks for deliverance on the part of Ora Bridgefield.

It was a signal victory for Broadway Billy and his allies, and the lad's heart beat high with exultation.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed, when they had all been secured, "what do you think about it, now, Pinon Peter? You picked up a rough razor when you tackled Broadway Billy. When he gets his work in he shaves awful close!"

Pinon Pete had turned a sickly yellow, and his jaw dropped.

"Not Broadway Billy?" he hoarsely gasped.

"That's my name on week days," was the response of the jubilant lad.

"Then we give right up," Pete muttered, despairingly. "I have heard of you."

"I don't see what else you can do," declared Billy. "You had better give up as prisoners than give up the ghost, I opine. Have you got 'em secure, Rover?"

"You bet, my son. They is good fer ten years apiece."

The prisoners were taken out of the cabin, disarmed, and arranged in line, all tied together.

Ora Bridgefield, a young and pretty girl, had come forth, and had placed herself under Billy's protection, thanking him over and over again.

In due time they set out for Manitou, the old ranger leading the way, Skinny coming next at the head of the file of prisoners, and Billy bringing up the rear.

At the head of the line was Pinon Pete, and next to him was Milo Jarvis, with the others following, the wounded man and the old hag bringing up the end of the villainous procession. And Billy had a weapon in each hand to keep order in the villainous line, pretty Ora walking joyously at his side.

It was a toilsome march, for all were exceedingly tired, but finally they entered the village of their destination and turned their weary steps in the direction of the Bridgefield cottage.

Not far had they gone along the street when Miss Bridgefield was recognized, and a shout was raised, and by the time the Bridgefield cottage was reached a great crowd was with them.

Mr. and Mrs. Bridgefield, with their guests and servants, hearing the great cheering, were in the yard, and in a few moments the lost daughter was in her mother's arms.

Everybody was trying to talk at once, and it was a considerable time before head or tail could be understood of the situation. The one great fact, at first, was enough—that Ora Bridgefield had been found alive and well.

But, finally, Broadway Billy was called on to tell his story, and he did so, going over the points as we have seen them worked out, in a matter-of-fact way, without anything of credit to himself.

When he had done, loud cheering occupied the next two or three minutes. He had done a clever thing, and all praise was due to him and his stalwart allies.

The young lady, in telling her part of it, explained that she had been met on the trail on the afternoon of her disappearance by five masked men. They ordered her to dismount, and she refused, and when they sprung at her, she fired her revolver, hitting one of them in the arm. But she was speedily overcome, made a prisoner, and her horse was pushed over the edge of the trail to the depths below, where it

was found. The blood-mark on its side was made by the hand of the wounded man.

She was taken to the old cabin from which Billy and his pards had rescued her, and there put under the keeping of the old woman, who guarded carefully against her escape. No harm had been done her, other than the terrible distress to her mind and the strain upon her nerves. But she was almost ill, and as soon as she had told her story her mother took her into the house, weeping over her for very joy.

Next came the confession of Pinon Pete.

Being in the hardest sort of luck, as he expressed it, the idea had come to him and Milo Jarvis to abduct Miss Bridgefield and hold her for ransom. They carried out their plan, so far as the abduction went, but the great excitement it raised immediately, and the prompt and determined action taken by Mr. Bridgefield, so frightened them that they had dared to make no further move, though they were preparing to do so when Broadway Billy ran counter to Pinon Pete and alarmed him in the manner set forth, and not without cause, as the worthies now realized.

That there was an exciting time at Manitou goes without saying.

Broadway Billy and his partners came in for a grand ovation, and were the heroes of the hour.

Mr. Bridgefield took them into his home, and there feasted them to Skinny's entire delight and keenest satisfaction. Then he rewarded them generously for the great service they had rendered.

The dastards, hardly necessary to say, were dealt with promptly.

Officers took charge of them, and there was a fair prospect of their spending a considerable time in prison.

Oscar Danton was the happiest man in the whole county, if possible, and he could not do enough to show Billy how he appreciated what he had done.

In his great delight he sought out Meredith Paynes, and humbly apologized to him for the suspicion he had entertained against him, and his rival accepted it in good spirit and generously forgave.

That day and night Billy and his allies remained at Manitou, and on the following morning took train for the point where they had left their horses, and where they were heartily welcomed by the railroad agent who had given them such help in their work.

And a more delighted man than that same agent it would have been hard to find. That the hero of it all was Broadway Billy, of whom he had read, he could hardly believe, but Billy succeeded in convincing him of the truth of it before they parted. Remaining one day at that place, on the following morning the trio set out for Denver.

"That's the sort of pippins we are," Billy remarked to his companions, when once more upon their way. "With you and Roger here to back me, I'm ready to tackle any sort of a case. Oh, we are on deck yet, my gay and festive dumpling, and our barner is flung to the breeze on the side of the afflicted and them as Leeds help in the tussle with villainy. Whoop!" and his voice would have done credit to a Pawnee hair-lifter.

"I wonder what sort of a consarned diffikilt is awaiting us at Denver, anyhow?" mused Skinny. "Billy's got 'em mighty bad, that's sure, and that means business!"

Billy's only answer was:
"Whoop! Whoop!"

THE END.

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